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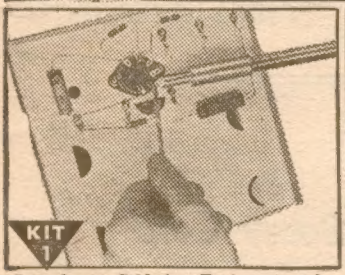

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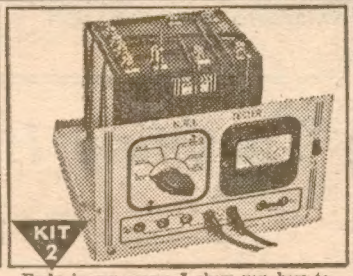

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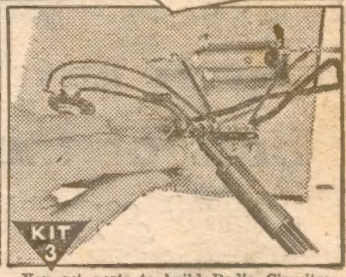

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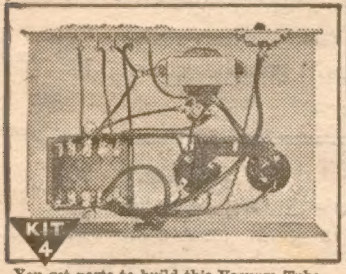

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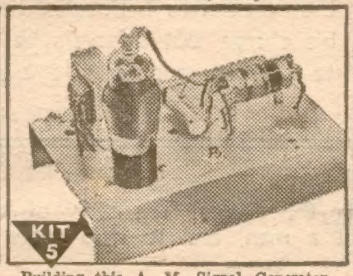

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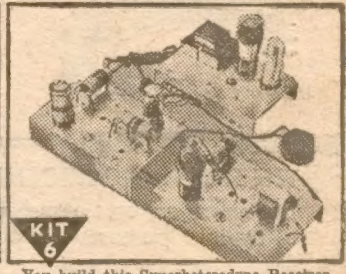

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At the end of a thousand mile trail, Texan Larry Brennan arrives in Douglas with a herd of cows in his charge, but discovers he can't deliver cattle to a corpse—and heads for a swift gun showdown! 11

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When taxation becomes extortion, Zorro dons his black cloak of battle!

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A ranch and rangeland gabfest conducted by America's foremost rodeo expert

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The exciting true-fact story of the only survivor of Custer's Last Stand

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GREETINGS, waddies, just grab yourselves some table hardware and gather round the old Chuck Wagon while we dish up a full feed of range, rodeo and cowboy news and gossip.

While the 1947 rodeo season was a pretty good season it was somewhat spotted, some rodeos doing even better than in 1946, which was the banner season of all time, others falling far short of the 1946 attendance. All in all, the opening of the 1948 season found rodeo folks guessing as to just what the season would be like, but thus far the most optimistic hopes are being fulfilled, as far as attendance at rodeos is concerned.

But, at the same time, high prices of materials have hit the rodeo producers in the cost of stock and equipment. In normal times, $75.00 to $100.00 was considered a fair price for a Brahma bucking bull, while within the past year they have sold at prices from $200.00 to $500.00 each. Thirty dollars or $50.00 was the price of bulldogging steers, but within the last nine months the price has increased to $125.00 or $150.00 and the rodeo producers know that they must have an adequate number of these animals in order to put on a real rodeo.

If the cost of living and travel continues to get higher, purses at rodeos will have to be raised over the amount of 1947 and during the season just finished they were at an all-time high.

The 1948 Prize Lists

The situation was such that the Rodeo Cowboys Association did not want to approve in advance prize lists for rodeos to be staged during the 1948 season, as they had done in the past, preferring to wait until they could get a clearer perspective of what the outlook for the season was before approving most of the prize lists.

Naturally the Rodeo Cowboys Association do not want to set the prizes or force the committees and producers to set the prizes at more than they can pay, but at the same time the prizes must be big enough to offset the cost of living and travel for the contestants, and to set them at this standard might be more than the gate receipts would stand. For that reason the RCA held a convention in Denver for four days in January, just before the opening of the National Western Stock Show and Rodeo, and invited all rodeo producers, committees, and those interested in rodeo to meet with them, to bring their prize lists for approval and their problems and troubles where they could be discussed and measures fair to all parties be adopted.

Officers of the RCA

The officers of the RCA elected for 1948 are as follows: Toots Mansfield, president; Everett Shaw, vice-president; Clay Carr, vice-president. The directors are Eddie Curtis, in charge of steer wrestling; Dee Burk, calf roping; Jim Snively, steer roping; Charles Colbert, bull riding; Bill Linderman, bareback bronc riding; Gene Pruett, saddle bronc riding; Chuck Sheppard, team tying; Buff Brady, contract performers.

So far as the Rodeo Cowboys Association is concerned, they had a wonderful season during 1947, with 760 rodeos under their banner of approved prize lists, and approximately two million dollars in prize money distributed among the contestants during the season. The RCA carried on in excellent form, gained in membership and

(Continued on page 8)

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 6)

prestige, added many member rodeos in their point award system, and as an organization had the most successful season of its career.

Results at Portland

Portland, Oregon's, Pacific International Livestock Exposition and Rodeo, the second since the end of the war, was a great success, with standing room only at most of the 13 performances. Every event was hotly contested to the very finish. A very close finish resulted in the calf roping when Chuck Sheppard nosed out Red Allen by just two-fifths of a second. Sheppard also won the saddle bronc riding by a very narrow margin.

Tom Bride, one of the best of bull riders, seemed to have the final prize already in the bag but was bucked off in the final ride on a bull called "Hairpin" and thus cut out of the final winners. Bill Markley, cowboy clown, did an excellent job in attracting the attention of the vicious bulls from the riders in dismounting or being bucked off, and at much risk to himself saved many of them from injury.

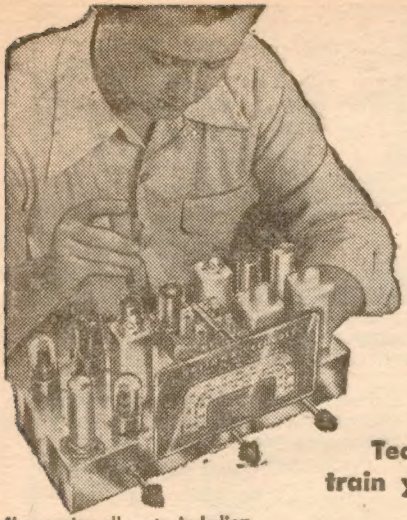
Outstanding, or the highest scored rides of the rodeo, were made by Dan Poore, in riding a particular bad bronc, Grey Eagle, in the saddle bronc riding, and by Jack Sherman and Ross Dollarhide in the bull riding.

Mitch Owens, the game little one-handed cowboy bronc and bull rider, who won the bull riding championship at Madison Square Garden in 1939, was hospitalized with a badly broken leg. It was Mitch's first mount since another broken leg put him out of rodeo circulation in June. Mitch was thrown from a bucking horse, and hobbled halfway out of the arena before he broke down and called for assistance. Surgery was required to repair the damaged limb but Mitch was on crutches and on hand to see the final performances and was still wearing a good-natured grin.

Theo. B. Wilcox, was president, Walter A. Holt secretary, Bob and Henry Christensen were the producers and furnished the stock. The judges were Cecil Bedford and Frank Molarius, with Gene Payne doing the announcing.

The final results in saddle bronc riding

(Continued on page 137)



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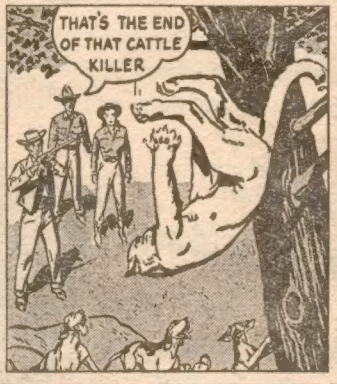
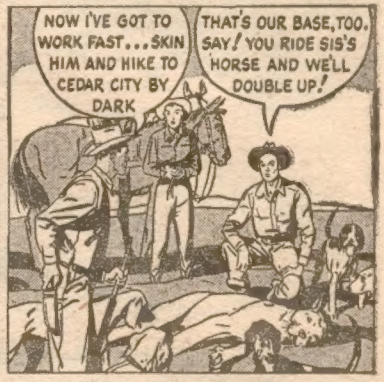
SALLY BRETT AND HER BROTHER JOE, ARE JUST TURNING HOMEWARD AFTER A DAY-LONG RIDE IN STATE CANYON FOREST WHEN . . .





DINNER? THANKS, BUT I'D BETTER DRIVE TO THE RANCH. I'M HARDLY IN SHAPE TO APPEAR IN PUBLIC
DON'T WORRY, WE CAN CLEAN UP IN MY ROOM
HOTEL
LATER

I SURE WISH YOU'D ACCEPT. THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM AT THE RANCH AND . . .
WE STILL HAVE A WEEK, SIS. HOW ABOUT IT?
I'D LOVE IT
HE'S SO HANDSOME!

YOU SKIM OFF TOUGH BEARD SLICK AS SILK . . . GET BETTER SHAVES AND MORE OF 'EM . . . WITH THIN GILLETTES. NO OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADE COMPARES WITH 'EM FOR KEENNESS AND LONG LIFE. THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR RAZOR EXACTLY, TOO . . . NEVER SCRAPE OR IRRITATE YOUR FACE AS DO MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10¢

A COMPLETE ACTION NOVEL BY **BARRY CORD**

The Texan twisted the gun out of Bob Masters' hand (CHAP. I)

BOSS of the TUMBLING H

At the end of a thousand-mile trail, Larry Brennan arrives in Douglas with a herd of cows in his charge—but he discovers he can't deliver cattle to a corpse!

CHAPTER I

Keep Yore Hands Off!

LARRY BRENNAN turned the roan against the driving rain and crossed Douglas' muddy street to the small rectangle of light painting the mud in front of the Timberlake Stables.

This was the end of a thousand-mile trail, but the fact did not lighten the Texan's weariness nor rid him of a nagging irritation that made him taut-nerved and surly. It had been as rough a drive as he had ever bossed and the thought of Duke and the boys making the best of a wet camp did not please him.

The roan stopped in front of the barn.

Brennan leaned over the saddle-horn and called:

"Hello, in there."

A stumpy man with a thin face and a black patch over his right eye showed up in the crack. He studied the Texan, and muttered something unintelligible. Then the barn door creaked back on overhead runners, allowing Brennan to ride inside.

A lantern sat on a big packing case, throwing a smoky yellow light over cards spread for solitare. The strong smell of manure was sharp in the steamy heat. The rain rattled noisily on the high-beamed roof and a horse stamped restlessly in one of the stalls.

Larry Brennan dismounted. The hostler slid the door back to within a yard of closing, then turned and shuffled up to the Texan.

"Bad night, ain't it, stranger? Yuh come in along the river trail?"

"No," Brennan said, discouraging further gossip with the monosyllable. "Grain feed her and bed her down," he instructed briefly. "I'll be around in the mornin'."

The stumpy hostler shrugged and picked up his lantern. Brennan followed him to a rear stall and helped strip saddle and gear from the roan.

"I'll take my warbag," he said, as the hostler started to stuff it into a wall rack.

He slid the roll down near his feet and leaned back against the boards, unbuttoning his slicker to reach into his coat for the makings. He was a big man, broad and compactly built, and there was a quiet sureness in his movements. He had put on a clean shirt and a worn gray coat to come to town and the skirt of the coat hid the plain walnut butt of a Colt tied down low on his right hip.

HE lighted the cigarette, cupping the match in a rope-roughened palm, and with the first drag he felt weariness weigh him down, like a cement block settling on his broad shoulders.

He waited until the hostler finished, came out of the stall, and picked up his lantern.

"Where do I find El Dorado?" Brennan asked.

"Down the road a piece," the stumpy man said. He walked to the stable door where rain was making inroads through the small opening. He waved into the night. "Across the street and to yore left. Can't miss it. Big, two-story buildin' with a false front and a big board sign."

Brennan came up beside him and started to button his slicker. Both drew back as a rider suddenly loomed up out of the darkness.

"Open up, Ned!" the rider said.

Ned pushed the sliding door back and the man rode in and dismounted. The stableman slid the door back against the rain and turned.

"Howdy, Mr. Allison," he greeted.

"Hello, Ned." The man had a soft voice, like a woman's. "Take care of Nig for me."

"I shore will," Ned said. He ran a hand over the magnificent black's steaming flank. "Looks like yuh rode him pretty hard."

"I was in a hurry," Allison said shortly. He unbuttoned his wet slicker and reached into his coat pocket for a ready-made cigarette. He glanced at Brennan. "Plumb bad night to be on the trail," he observed. "Coming to or leaving our town?"

Ned had gone to the rear of the barn with the black and had taken the lantern with him. The man he had addressed as Allison was a vague figure in the semi-darkness.

"Comin'," Brennan said shortly.

A match crackled on Allison's thumbnail. The flame lifted to the cigarette between his lips.

Larry Brennan had a glimpse of a lean, handsome face, close-shaved and well-groomed—a touch of gray at the temples. The man puffed deeply and his eyes sought Brennan's briefly before he blew out the flame.

Ned came back, swinging the light.

to Bear on a Sinister Range Conspiracy!

"Did yuh hear about Halliday gettin' killed, Mr. Allison?" he asked.

"No." Allison turned and looked at Ned and there was surprise in his voice. "No —I didn't hear. How'd it happen?"

Brennan had been about to go out. He stopped and started to pull his slicker col-

LARRY BRENNAN

lar up around his ears, interest holding him in the doorway.

"Found him clubbed to death in the El Dorado about an hour ago," the hostler said. "Velie, the night clerk, found him lyin' on the floor by the bed."

"Who killed him?"

Ned shrugged. "Velie says it must have been Bob Masters. That's what he told Albright. Claims Bob was up in Halliday's room a couple of hours earlier and he could hear 'em arguin' clear down into the lobby. When Masters came downstairs he had a cut on his lip. That's what started Velie to thinkin', and after a while he went upstairs to see if Halliday was all right."

Allison frowned. The garrulous stableman fumbled in his unbuttoned vest for the remnants of his plug and popped it into his mouth.

"Looks like the case of bitin' the hand that fed him," he said indistinctly. "That Masters kid is shore a wild one."

A hard smile flickered across Allison's face. "Yeah—too wild." He glanced at Brennan again. The Texan was standing by the opening, staring into the rain, finishing his cigarette. "What's McVail doing about it?"

"Nothin'. The sheriff's out of town. And Albright ain't made a move to pick up the kid though he's in town somewhere. So's his sister."

Allison ground his cigarette out under his heel.

"Well, that's the Law's problem," he said indifferently. He walked to the door and paused briefly at Brennan's side. "Hope you like our town, stranger," he said politely, and stepped out into the rain.

LARRY BRENNAN took a last puff on his cigarette and snapped it out into the trampled mud. Ned came up beside him and stared after Allison's striding figure.

"That's Charley Allison," the hostler said. "Owns the Ace of Spades outfit down the valley and the Casino in town. Don't look it, but Charley's a bad man to get into an argument with."

"I wouldn't have guessed it," Brennan said shortly, unimpressed. The shock of hearing of Halliday's death was still in him. Turning, he sought affirmation in a casual remark. "I used to know a man named Halliday. Ran into him down in Texas a couple of years ago. Wonder if it might be the same man yuh just mentioned as gettin' killed."

The stumpy man took the bait. "Not this Halliday. Jeff ain't been out of Timberlake Valley since he came into it near thirty years ago."

Brennan nodded. He stood in the doorway, not seeing the wet street of this strange town a thousand miles from his

Texas starting point. His feet were wet inside his scuffed boots and he felt chill and uncomfortable, and a little disheartened.

He had over six hundred head of cattle and eight men standing guard over them a half-day's ride out of town. Cows for Jeff Halliday!

The rain rattled noisily on the roof and the Texan thought of the long trail miles, the treacherous river crossings, the dry stretches and the cold he and the men had endured. And now Halliday was dead and Brennan had on his hands a herd badly in need of rest and pasturage.

He felt the stableman's curious stare and shook off his wearying thoughts.

"Too bad about Halliday," he said. "Hope nobody takes a fancy to try the same with me." He picked up his roll. "See yuh in the mornin'."

The rain hit him like bird shot, driving into his face. He ducked his head against it and cut across the street, hating the ankle-deep mud that sucked at his boots.

He reached the boardwalk and swung left, following Ned's directions. It was not too late, but the storm kept the inhabitants of this trail town indoors. The Texan strode down the walk, his heels making a flat sound on the boards. The wooden awning here extended to the street and it sheltered him from the downpour.

Halfway down the block he paused, dropped his bag and rolled another cigarette. The smoke felt good in his lungs. He relaxed against a darkened door and tried to think.

A couple of horsemen rode past, hunched against the rain. They turned a corner and left the road deserted except for a buckboard tied up at the end of the block.

The wind had its way tonight, gusting noisily against the dark buildings, and the rain pelting the puddles had a dreary sound.

A thousand miles. The thought went through him, flatly, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. A thousand miles for nothing.

He finished his cigarette and picked up his bag.

A girl came out to the walk, pulling the collar of her raincoat up around her neck. The wind came around the corner, buffeting her as she climbed into the buckboard. The team moved restlessly as she gathered up the reins.

The Texan felt her quick glance as he drew abreast of the buckboard. She was stiff against the driving rain, her face in shadow—and he felt impatience in her.

She was evidently waiting for the man who came out of the lighted doorway just ahead of the Texan. He stepped out without warning and Brennan instinctively thrust out a hand to fend off a collision.

The man jumped like a startled cat at the touch of the Texan's hand. He whirled and crouched, his voice lashing out in bitter challenge. "Keep yore hands off me, cuss yuh!"

He was a young fellow, barely topping twenty—lithe, cat-wiry, with a mop of yellow hair and a bitter, tight-lipped face. He was jumpy—and dangerous. In the next breath the Texan sensed this. It should have made him cautious, but he was in a surly mood and now anger ran quickly through him, flattening his voice.

"Get out of my way!"

The girl's voice cut in sharply behind him.

"Bob! Don't start trouble!"

CHAPTER II

Dead Man's Room

LARRY Brennan, stepping past the young fellow, brushed him contemptuously aside. The kid whirled like a striking cat. His fingers closed on Brennan's shoulder. He pulled the big Texan around and slapped his face. His voice was low and intense.

"What's the matter, big fella? Haven't yuh got the nerve to—"

The tone, more than the slap, drew the violence out of Brennan. His bag was in his right hand. He dropped it as he clamped his left around the young fellow's gun wrist. He used his weight to jam his squirming assailant against the building and his powerful hand twisted until the fingers unclenched and the gun dropped to the walk.

Brennan stepped back then and slapped his younger opponent's face, cuffing him in a series of blows that vented the raw anger in him.

The girl had said something he had not understood in the first burst of anger, but now her voice was close and sharp, striking into his awareness.

"Quit it, stranger! And don't make a move for your gun!"

Brennan shoved the youngster roughly against the wall, kicked his Colt out of reach, and turned.

The girl was standing just behind him, vague in the shadows. The nickel-plated revolver in her gauntleted hand reflected light in tiny wet beads along its barrel. The boy was backed against the building, shaking his head. He looked like some wild animal which had been clubbed and was ready to spring.

The anger in Brennan simmered. "You his keeper, ma'am?"

"Yes," she said.

There was contempt in her tone that drew his ire, an antagonism at once definite and unexplained.

"Then take him home before he gets hurt!"

The young fellow lunged away from the wall. Larry Brennan turned, but the girl was between them, her revolver leveled at a spot just above the Texan's belt.

"There'll be no more trouble tonight!" she said harshly. "Bob, get on that buckboard! We've got a long way to go."

The youth caught himself with an effort. He looked past the girl to Brennan, and a streak of light from within the building touched the lean, taut lines of his jaw. A muscle quivered in his cheek. Then he stepped back, retrieved his Colt, and walked to the buckboard.

Larry Brennan's shoulders prickled, but he did not look around. The slim girl looked at him with deeper contempt.

"Next time you try to do a job for Allison," she said, "wait until our backs are turned. Or use the darkness of an alley!"

The rain pattered swiftly along the top of the awning as she stepped back and climbed into the seat beside the youth. The restless team swung away from the hitchrack and went trotting up the street. Neither the girl nor the boy looked back.

The anger in Brennan died slowly, leaving a flat residue of wonder. A strange pair. And then, thinking he would not be long in Douglas, he dismissed them. He was starting for the El Dorado whose sign he could see across the street when a voice said: "Yuh're the first man I ever saw do it, stranger. Manhandle Bob Masters!"

Brennan turned. A spare-framed character in a long black coat and a stove-pipe hat stood in the doorway behind him. The light from inside silhouetted his indolent figure. Brennan frowned, sensing more than conversational interest in the man.

"Good thing his sister was along," the character added. He spoke as if he had something in his mouth. He shifted a little and the light outlined the left side of his seamed face, bringing into view a corncob pipe. "Yep," he repeated casually. "Lucky for you his sister was along. Lennie Masters is the only person who can handle Bob."

"A bad hombre, eh?" Larry Brennan said.

Then his eyes picked up the rifle this man had placed by his side against the door frame, and suddenly he knew how close he might have come to death had the girl not been there.

"For a wild kid he seems to have a lot of friends," Brennan said tightly.

His glance moved from the faintly smiling man to gilt lettering on the show windows behind him:

SAM LUCE, UNDERTAKER

"I'm Luce," the man said quietly. "Some people call me Socrates Sam—on account I ask a lot of questions." He

watched Brennan shift his bag to the other hand. "You ride for Charley Allison?"

RAIN made a fast, thin pounding on the awning and the tiredness came back to the big Texan. He was in no mood for this sort of conversational fencing.

"No," he said curtly, and turned away.

Brennan frowned and looked back.

"Wait."

"It was a fair question," the undertaker said.

"Look," Brennan said flatly. "I'm a stranger here. Rode in less than fifteen minutes ago, lookin' for a man named Jeff Halliday."

"Yuh came late," Sam said. He straightened and knocked his pipe against the door. "Come inside. I'll show yuh what's left of Jeff."

Brennan hesitated. He felt empty inside, as if all purpose had been drained out of him. Halliday had meant nothing to him, and he didn't fancy looking at a corpse, but he followed "Socrates Sam" inside.

The front room, serving at a waiting room for the relatives of any deceased who waited here for burial, had stuffed horsehair furniture and the faint smell of flowers lingered. Sam opened a rear door that led into the workshop where he did his embalming.

A body lay on a plain wooded table, covered by a sheet. The undertaker beckoned Brennan to him and when the Texan was at his side, he raised a corner of the sheet.

Brennan glanced at the leathery features of a man in his fifties. Then Sam dropped the sheet and the Texan stepped back and rolled a cigarette. The smell of death and the chemicals in the room sickened him. He drew in a lungful of smoke and looked at Sam Luce.

"I heard Halliday was clubbed to death," he said.

Luce nodded. He dipped his pipe into an oilskin pouch and thumbed tobacco into the corncob.

"Jeff was killed in his room at the El Dorado a little over an hour ago," he said. "His nephew, Bob Masters—that young feller yuh saw outside—was the last man to see him alive."

Brennan frowned. "Nephew?"

"Yuh'll hear talk that Bob killed his uncle in a quarrel," Luce said. He scraped a match on the seat of his pants and touched the flame to his pipe. "Bob's a wild one," he admitted, puffing deeply. "But he didn't kill Jeff."

Larry Brennan was silent.

"Jeff was a close friend of mine," the undertaker added. "We came into the valley together when Douglas was a crossroads town and elk grazed over range now owned by the Tumblin' H and the Ace of Spades."

He paused and looked at Brennan as if wondering how far he should go. The Texan waited, letting him make his own decision.

"There's a fight on now, for control of the valley," Luce finally said. "Allison's makin' his bid for it. He owns the Ace of Spades across the river from the Tumblin' H. In the past months some pretty hard characters have been passin' through town, goin' up to join his outfit."

Brennan shrugged, and the undertaker dropped his eyes to the gun bulging against Larry's slicker.

"Bob Masters and his sister took you for one of 'em just now," he said.

"It makes sense." The Texan nodded. And then, because he had his own problem, he asked, "Who's runnin' the Tumblin' H now?"

"Jeff was a bachelor," Luce replied. "Bob and Lennie Masters have been with him since they were toddlers and they're all the relatives he had. They'll be takin' over the Tumblin' H and tryin' to run it with the help of Bill Tate, Halliday's old foreman."

"Too bad," Brennan said drily.

He turned and walked out of the room. Luce followed him to the outside door.

"The Tumblin' H is nearly shot," he said, as if it should mean something to this Texan. "Jeff was tryin' to keep it together till he got help from a friend of his

in Texas."

Brennan frowned. "Well?"

The undertaker looked at him. "You the Texan Jeff was expectin'?"

"Yeah," Larry Brennan said shortly. "It looks like I got here too late." He turned and left Luce staring at him.

The sign creaked dismally over the El Dorado's door as Larry Brennan passed under it and entered the hotel. Out of the rain he loosened his slicker and shook water from his battered Stetson.

There was no one in the small lobby except the night clerk at the desk. A pair of potted palms graced the center of the room. There was a dining room off to the left, closed now, and up by the stairs slatted doors testified to a hotel bar. Voices and the clink of glasses came to the tired Texan as he walked to the desk.

THE clerk was a keen-faced young man with a wisp of a blond mustache and a sour twist to his lips. He glanced up as Brennan paused at the desk and nodded none too graciously.

"Yeah, we got a room," he mumbled. "Just been vacated."

He turned a well-thumbed register around and handed over a stubby pencil.

Brennan sighed. He turned and looked in the direction of the bar, but decided he was even too tired for a drink.

The clerk was looking down at the register when Brennan asked:

"There a telegraph office in town?"

"On Lodestone Avenue," the clerk replied. "Two blocks south." He glanced up at the wall clock ticking under dusty elk antlers over the bar entrance. "You're too late to send a message tonight. Jake closes at ten."

"It can wait," Brennan said. He picked up his warbag. "Does a key go with the room?"

"I'll show you where it is," the clerk said. He came out from behind his desk, limping a little. "Sorry to have to do it, Mr. Brennan."

"Do what?"

"Give you this room. A man was killed in it a while ago."

As the roan grazed Brennan, he tried desperately to keep his balance, but his foot slipped on the edge and he fell (CHAP. IX)

Brennan paused and the clerk wet his lips.

"It's the only thing we have right at this moment."

"It's all right," Brennan said. "Long as the bed's clean."

The room in which Halliday had been killed was at the rear of a long narrow hall. A window in the end wall opened to back stairs. Rain rattled against the streaked panes.

The clerk opened the door with a key, stepped inside, and scraped a match. He lighted the lamp in a wall bracket by the door, placed the long key with its hotel tag on the table and looked at the Texan.

"It'll do," Brennan said, and frowned as the man limped hurriedly out and went downstairs.

He looked at the iron-framed bed, the scarred dresser, the worn rug and the cheap print of a buffalo hunt on one wall and the Lincoln portrait on the other. He was dead tired. The bed invited and a cynical mood thrust off the slight repulsion that came to him at the thought of Halliday's death.

Peeling off his slicker he dropped it over a chair back. His coat was next. Rain had seeped down his neck and wet his blue cotton shirt in streaks across his wide shoulders.

Still frowning he walked to the bed and sat down. The springs creaked dismally.

Unconsciously he reached into his shirt pocket for the letter he had carried with him from Texas. It was to have been his identification to Halliday. Terse and to the point, it did not explain why Jeff Halliday had been in trouble, nor did it indicate who might have killed him.

It was addressed to John Barstow of the Triangle spread, and read:

Dear John:

It's been a long time since you were up this way. Things are not going so well with me. Being forced to sell or get out, and I don't want to sell and am too old to move.

Need five hundred head of grazing stock by the end of September or I go under. Can you help me out?

It was signed: "Your old trailmate, Jeff Halliday."

The letter was written in a woman's hand, but the signature was evidently Jeff's. There was a P.S. and a roughly drawn map of the Timberlake country. The P.S. contained instructions for the Triangle trail boss to leave the herd in the canyon marked "X" on the map, and to come to town and get a room in the El Dorado where Halliday would get in touch with him.

Brennan scowled as he repocketed the letter. He had obeyed instructions. He had left Duke Sayer in charge of the Triangle herd with orders to take things easy until he got back. He had come to Douglas expecting to find Halliday and to arrange for delivery of the cattle to Halliday.

Now it didn't seem so simple.

CHAPTER II.

Knifed!

UNBUCKLING his gun belt, Brennan hung it over the bed post so that the plain walnut butt of the heavy .45 dangled near the pillow. Walking to the wall light he blew out the flame. He turned and stood a moment, looking at the black-streaked window, thinking of the boys huddled in a wet camp.

After a while he walked back to the bed and pulled off his boots. The bed creaked as he stretched his big frame under the covers. He placed both hands under his head and stared up at the dark ceiling. Finally he slept.

The rain was still drumming against the window when the Texan's eyes snapped open. The room was a pit of darkness. Nothing moved within it. But Larry Brennan lay quiet, alert, knowing that something had awakened him.

For a long-drawn minute he lay still, listening to the storm brawl against the building. Then, as he turned and reached

up for his Colt, he heard what had awakened him.

Someone was fumbling with the knob.

Brennan whipped his stockinged feet over the bedside and straightened to sitting position. He lifted his gun from holster and crossed the room to the wall beside the door.

In the hallway a voice breathed, "Jeff!" and cut off, as if the speaker were suddenly out of breath.

Brennan frowned. He shifted his grip on the Colt, holding it flat in his hand and bringing it up by his ear for a quick, chopping stroke.

The knob turned. The door swung inward. Brennan shifted his position as a shadowy figure lurched into the room, hit the door with his shoulder, and sprawled on his face.

The door banged against the other wall and jarred back against the man on the floor.

Brennan lowered his Colt. He waited, puzzled and tense. No one seemed to have heard the commotion. He could hear men talking in the bar off the lobby—the voices drifting faintly up the stairs. In the room across the hall a man snored.

Larry Brennan bent over his uninvited guest. His eyes were becoming adjusted to the darkness and a diffusion of light from downstairs dimly lighted the sprawled figure. The man was short and wiry and his patched, misshapen clothes were wet and clung to his thin frame like wet wallpaper.

Brennan knelt beside him. The man was hurt. As he sprawled there on his face, his hands were clenching and unclenching with spasmodic pain. The Texan turned him over and lifted him to sitting position. The man sagged against his arm, his head lolling back.

"Jeff—I got it. In my—pocket—"

His voice choked off into a gasp. He looked up at Brennan not seeing him. His thin, pinched face was covered with pinpoints of white beard. He looked like some drunken bum. But he was dying—and he thought he was speaking to Jeff Halliday.

"I'm not—" Brennan said, and stopped, knowing his explanation would not matter.

"You won't have to—pay me—Jeff. Won't do me any good—now. Saber caught me goin' through—" The man's breath whistled as he labored to finish. "—knifed me. But I got—away—"

He stiffened, straining hard against Brennan's arm. Then he relaxed.

Larry Brennan didn't move right away. He stood there, a dead man in his arms, listening to the rain. Evidently no one had seen this man come up through the lobby, or if they had, they had given it no thought.

Whoever he was, he had not known Jeff Halliday was dead. And he had come to Halliday's room to deliver something for which Halliday had been willing to pay.

Tossing his Colt on the bed, Brennan eased the body back onto the floor. He reached into one of the dead man's pockets, found nothing, and was fumbling inside another when a board creaked in the hallway just outside the door.

"Don't move!" a voice whispered softly. "Don't even turn around!"

Brennan didn't move.

He heard another floor board creak, and the faint jingle of spurs. Then someone loomed over him. A pair of scuffed, muddy boots paused close beside him. He could see black-striped pants tucked into the boot tops, noted that one steel spur had the rowel missing.

THERE was an instant of silence, then one of the boots moved, and the thought flashed through the Texan that the man standing over him was raising his Colt for a clubbing blow.

The scalp above Brennan's ears prickled. Gambling that his assailant would not risk a shot, he suddenly lunged sideward, slamming his weight against the man's knees.

The fellow cursed as he took a header over the Texan.

Larry Brennan scrambled to his feet. Inside the room his assailant was doing

Lead smashed at them from the darkness as Brennan ploughed

the same. His silhouette showed briefly against the window and Brennan plunged toward him, driving his shoulder into the man. They went back onto the bed and Brennan got his hand on the man's throat.

The prowler drove a hard knee into Brennan's stomach. The Texan grunted and his opponent twisted violently, breaking Larry's hold. Brennan made a lunge for the man as he broke away from the bed. His fingers closed on the man's shoulder and he felt cloth tear in his hand as the man lunged free.

A fist drove into Brennan's face, throwing him off balance. Losing the man in the darkness then, Larry turned and made a dive for the bed where he had so carelessly tossed his Colt a few minutes before.

A .45 roared, its jarring report filling the room with noise. The slug ripped into the bedding beside Brennan. Then the Texan was rolling over into the small area between the bed and the far wall, carrying his Colt with him.

Spurs jingled thinly. Brennan came erect in time to catch a glimpse of a vague figure vanishing through the doorway. Hurdling the bed, Brennan reached the door and stared blankly down an empty hallway.

Shouts were coming up from the lobby. A door midway down the hall opened slowly and a whiskered, sleepy-eyed man cautiously looked out. The Texan turned and went back inside his room. He closed the door and bent over the dead man, his fingers again reaching inside the wet coat pocket.

This time he found a long white envelope, containing a letter. It was too dark to read it, to find out what it meant. But there was no doubt that the man at

into the burly foreman, sending him spinning (CHAP. XVII)

his feet had been killed because of this, and that Jeff Halliday had been willing to pay money for it.

He straightened, suddenly aware that men were tramping up the steps. Crossing to the bed he slipped his Colt into its holster and the envelope inside his coat pocket.

Then he sat down on the bed and waited for developments.

There was confusion in the hallway.

"Where was the shootin'?" someone yelled.

Doors banged open and voices asked questions. Boots tramped toward Brennan's door. Someone opened it and called loudly:

"Hey! You hear the shootin'?" Larry did not answer and the slightly tipsy intruder took a step forward into the dark room. "Hey! Wake up!"

He tripped over the dead man and fell on his hands and knees. He cursed, staggering to his feet.

"Albright!" He leaped to the door and yelled down the hall. "Hey! Albright! There's a dead man in here!"

Boots clumped hurriedly down the hall and into the room. Someone else stumbled over the body and cursed. Some man scraped a match. A hard, horsy face looked at Larry Brennan above the match flame. Then the light was carried to the bracketed oil lamp and the yellow glare revealed a half dozen men crowding around in the room. More were in the hallway just outside the door.

Brennan slipped into his boots.

"Looks like guest night," he said, and then, holding his gaze on the lanky man who wore a badge, and who had struck the match, he added, "I don't know the

man, Deputy, and I don't know how it happened."

The deputy gave him a hard look as he knelt beside the victim.

"Bates!" he said in a surprised voice. "It's old Whisky Bates!"

"Yeah—and knifed in the back," an onlooker added, turning hostile eyes to Brennan. "I ain't never cared for the old bum, Ben—but even Bates deserved an even break!"

"Knifed?" another voice said. "What the devil was the shot we heard?"

Deputy Albright made no comment. He got up and walked to the head of the bed and drew out Brennan's Colt. He was a lanky individual with a taciturn expression and straw hair. A stub of a cigar, unlighted, jutted from his tight lips. Some wit once had made the classic remark that Ben Albright would wind up stoking a furnace down below still chewing on the same cigar stub.

HE CHECKED the loads in Brennan's Colt, sniffed at the muzzle. Then he replaced the weapon and looked impassively at the Texan.

"All right," he said out of the corner of his mouth. "How'd it happen?"

"I don't know," Brennan said.

The deputy frowned. He turned and went back to Bates and looked down at him. The long rip in the dead man's coat was dark with blood. He stood staring down at the body, then he turned, his voice striking out at the Texan.

"When did you get in, stranger?"

Brennan caught a glimpse of the night clerk hovering in the background.

"About eleven," he answered. "Came upstairs and went to sleep. Next thing I heard was a shot—then you came in."

He saw no reason to be more explicit, to explain how he had tangled with the man who had followed Bates to his room. There was too much going on in Douglas he didn't know, and until he had more answers he was going to play his hand close to his chest.

The deputy scowled. "Kinda queer, ain't it, stranger, that a bum like Bates should pick yore room to die in?"

Brennan shrugged. "Ain't it?"

"Passin' through?"

"Yeah, passin' through," Brennan said. "Came in out of the rain and took a room for the night. Can I help it if a man comes wanderin' in here in the middle of the night?"

"He must've had a reason, seein' as how he had a knife in his back when he started wanderin'," the deputy growled.

"Ain't this the room Jeff was killed in?" the man behind the deputy said.

Albright nodded. "Mebbe that's why Bates came up here," he said thoughtfully.

He stood by the wall, scowling and chewing on his cigar, and for a moment the patter of the rain was the only sound that broke the silence in that room. Then he said:

"All right—one of you hombres give me a hand with the old man. We'll take him down to Socrates Sam."

"Sam's doin' a thrivin' business tonight, Ben," someone remarked a little sarcastically.

The deputy looked at Larry and said, "Yeah—he's got his hands full."

He was in the doorway, holding the dead man under the arms, when he paused and looked back at Brennan.

"I'll be seein' yuh in the mornin', stranger," he said harshly. "Don't try to leave town tonight."

The footsteps and the arguing voices died away down the hall. Brennan crossed the room and closed the door. He stood looking at the bed, not listening to the monotonous beat of the rain against the window.

He was getting deeper and deeper into trouble without knowing why, and anger began to crawl through him, making him restless and impatient.

He walked to the chair where he had tossed his coat and took the envelope from a pocket.

It had a Kansas-Pacific stamped return address up in the left-hand corner, and it was addressed to Mark Carson, First National Bank, Douglas, Colorado. It read:

Dear Mark:
Surveyors will begin driving stakes for right of way through Timberlake Valley in the fall. Your original estimate of right of way correct. Full details later.

Respectfully,
L. J. Jacobson.

Brennan slipped the envelope back into his coat pocket and rolled a cigarette. He still didn't know what the situation here was, except that the K-P was building through the valley and that someone had followed Bates to get that letter back. And Halliday had been willing to pay money for it.

He shrugged and walked to the door, propping a straight-backed chair against the knob. He was dog-tired, and someone might try it again. He had no wish to wind up at Socrates Sam.

He walked to the window and raised it. It was hard to lift and squealed as it went up. Rain whipped in against the faded curtains. Brennan closed it and pulled down the shade.

Anyone trying to get in through the window would give ample warning.

The cigarette began to burn his fingers and he ground it out on the floor. There was nothing further he could do until he sent a wire to Barstow in Texas and got an answer.

CHAPTER IV

"The Stranger Can Wait"

RAIN HAD given way to a cold drizzle when Larry Brennan awakened. Gray daylight seeped around the edges of the pulled-down blind. The room looked dingy and cold and his irritation was still with him, leaving him raw-nerved and unrefreshed.

He rolled out of bed, found water in a tin pitcher on the stand beside the dresser and poured it into the basin. He washed. Drying himself with a towel he found on a hook behind the door he looked at himself in the dresser mirror.

His hair was black and shaggy on his sun-burned neck. His face was broad and the bones of his cheeks stood out against the slightly hooked ridge of his nose. It was a hard face, not given to much idle laughter, but there were crinkles of humor around his blue-gray eyes. His torso was wide and solid and flat-muscled. He was a big man, packing two hundred pounds on a six-foot-one frame, but years in the saddle had kept him lean and long-muscled, and he didn't look as if he weighed that much.

He was twenty-seven—but he had been on his own since turning fourteen—and he had been in a lot of towns on both sides of the Mexican border. He had had his share of fiddlefooting and he was getting tired of it.

This was his last drive for the Triangle, he thought, and it pleased him. Let Barstow get himself another trail boss. He was ready to settle down.

He threw the towel on the dresser and ran his fingers through his beard. Needed a shave, he thought, and some bacon and eggs to ease the clamor in his stomach.

When he came down into the lobby there was another clerk behind the desk. An older man sitting with his feet up on the counter. He looked at the Texan curiously.

"Good morning, Mr. Brennan," he said.

Larry nodded briefly. The aroma of frying bacon twitched his nostrils, and he headed for the dining room on the opposite side of the lobby.

A scattering of customers were eating at tables. He felt their curious glances as he picked out a seat near the window. An elderly woman took his order and as he waited, he looked idly into the muddy street.

The drizzle was like a gray mist, and the false fronts looked drab and dismal in the dull light. Horses nosed the rail of a saloon across the street, moving restlessly in fetlock-deep mud. A covered wagon, its six-horse team lunging in the traces, rolled by, heading for the gold fields fur-

ther north.

Right now Douglas was just a trail town, kept alive by the settlers and ranchers in the valley and fed by new arrivals coming up the river trail. But Brennan knew what would happen once news that the Kansas-Pacific would be b u i l d i n g through the valley reached the ears of the citizens of the town and country. There would be a mad scramble for land, a score of new businesses would open their doors, and for every legitimate house would rise the false-fronted, tinny-musicked gambling houses with hard-eyed men at roulette wheel and card table, ready to take the money from the gullible.

Larry Brennan had seen rail towns before and he liked the thought that he would not be here when the boom hit Douglas. He lighted a cigarette and smoked until the waitress brought him a large order of bacon and potatoes and scrambled eggs.

He was spearing his last hashed-brown potato when the conversation of two men a few feet away intruded into his preoccupation.

"Albright won't do a thing till Sheriff McVail gets back. But jailin's too good for that wild Masters kid. If Velie says he thinks Bob killed his uncle I believe it. He should be made to stand trial."

"I wouldn't want to be in McVail's place," the other man said. "Allison's been importin' a bunch of hardcase gunslingers since Bob threatened to kill him on sight. The Ace of Spades is primed for trouble. And no tellin' what the Tumbling H is goin' to do now—with Jeff dead. That leaves the Masters in control and—" He glanced at Brennan and dropped his voice.

BRENNAN finished breakfast and lighted another cigarette. His impatience was gone. There was trouble here. The conversation he had just overheard bore that out. But he was going to have none of it.

"I'll send a wire to Barstow," he thought, "and hang around, keepin' out of trouble till I get an answer. Ought to ride out and tell the boys the situation though."

He got up, paid his check at the cashier's counter, and went out. He located a barber shop across the street, next door to a saloon, where a swamper was wringing out a mop on the steps. The swamper stopped and looked at Brennan, crossing the muddy road.

There was the customary red-and-white painted pole in front of the shop and "TONY'S" painted in white letters across the show window. A customer was just vacating the single seat when Brennan entered. The Texan hung his coat on the hook, shifted his gun-belt, and walked to the chair.

"Be right weeth you, senor," Tony said. "Sit down, please."

He was counting money in a cigar box. Brennan could see him in the big mirror as he settled back—a short, roly-poly, olive-skinned man with a heavy mustache.

There was a hard step on the boardwalk. Then someone came into the shop.

Brennan caught a glimpse of a tall, swarthy-faced man in the mirror as Tony turned and came up to him.

"Shave," Brennan said. "And yuh might as well trim some of this wool off my neck. I feel like Custer."

"You're a little ahead of yourself, mister!" a voice interrupted coldly. "*I'm* next!"

Brennan frowned, as he turned his head.

The new customer was a rangy man with the dark, lean face of an Apache and the air of a man not used to being crossed. An expensively cut long gray coat reached well below his hips. Brennan's cursory glance did not miss the bulge of a waist-high special holster under the coat.

The man was evidently looking for trouble. He took off his coat, hung it beside Brennan's and started for the chair. The long-barreled Colt .45 held by a clip holster rode snug against his flowered waistcoat.

"Shave and trim, Tony," he said. He had a nasal, unpleasant voice. "The stranger can wait!"

Larry Brennan sat up. Tony had paused, his face whitening. "*Si*, Meester Trellis, you are next." He looked at Brennan and

spread his hands helplessly.

"The devil yuh are!" Brennan snapped. "Where I come from a man waits his turn, just like anybody else!"

Nick Trellis paused, obsidian black eyes studying the Texan. Then he took a step forward and closed long fingers in a fistful of Brennan's shirt.

"I said I'm next!" he said, sneering, and jerked the Texan forward in his chair.

Brennan came out of the chair under his own power, jerking free of the man's grip. Trellis had evidently come looking for trouble, and he got it. Brennan didn't give him a chance to go for his Colt.

Trellis was stepping back, trying to get clear, when the big Texan sank a maul-like fist into his stomach. The breath went out of the fellow with that one smash—and the fight as well. He doubled up. Brennan ducked under him and straightened, with Trellis draped across his shoulder like a sack of oats. Taking three strides that took him to the front of the shop, the big Texan shifted his limp burden for better leverage and heaved him through the show window.

The glass showered down around Nick Trellis. He rolled limply to the edge of the walk and was prevented from going into the muddy street by a rain barrel which was standing under a wooden trough.

The jangling glass brought men from across the street and others along the boardwalk. Brennan waited in front of the shattered window, a scowl on his beard-stubbled face, as the crowd gathered around Trellis.

Curious eyes glanced at Brennan. Then someone with an officious voice said:

"Better get Trellis over to Doc Stillwell's before he bleeds to death."

Larry Brennan walked back to the chair and relaxed with his head against the head rest.

"Forget about the window, Tony," he said. "I'll pay yuh for it."

TONY, by the chair, had been staring like a wax dummy. He came out of his trance and began to bob his head.

"Si, si, senor. Muy pronto."

His hand shook as he whipped up lather in a mug and began to brush it in on Brennan's face. The Texan relaxed and listened to the jabber of voices outside.

"Shore—I saw it. Tossed Nick through the winder like he was a grain sack."

"Nick'll kill him!" another voice said. "Unless he leaves town in a hurry."

"Who is he, anyway?" someone else asked. "One of Allison's new gunnies?"

"Naw," the first voice replied. "He wouldn't of tangled with Nick if he was."

The voice faded and there was a moment of silence. Then boots sounded on the walk and scraped leisurely across the threshold of Tony's barber shop.

Tony stopped scraping the left side of Brennan's face. He stood poised over the Texan, razor uplifted, looking uncertainly toward the door.

"For a stranger who hit town just last night, Brennan, yuh've got a peculiar hab-

[*Turn page*]

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it of gettin' into a considerable heap of trouble."

Larry Brennan turned his head. He had heard that flat voice before.

Deputy Albright walked into the room and leaned his lanky frame against a shelf lined with shaving mugs. He was as tight-lipped and hard as Brennan had noticed him to be the night before, and again a stub of cigar jutted from his lips. But there was a glint of suspicion in his eyes now.

"I see yuh've been readin' the El Dorado's register," Brennan said, easing back in his chair.

"Yeah," Albright admitted easily. "Habit of mine." He shifted the cigar stub to the other side of his mouth and scratched his ear. "Been doin' a bit of checkin' up, too," he added.

"Yuh're takin' that badge too serious," Larry Brennan said dryly. "Don't overwork it."

"Uh-huh." Albright glanced at the shattered window. He shook his head. "Nick Trellis is one of Douglas' most prominent citizens," he said. "In a dangerous way, I mean. Tossin' him through Tony's window wasn't exactly polite."

Brennan frowned. "Yuh got somethin' on yore mind, beside yore hat," he said. "All right, you talk—I'll lissen . . . Tony, go ahead and finish shavin' this bristle off my face."

"Shore," Albright said. "I'll tell yuh what I know—and then I'll speak my piece. First, yuh rode into town on a blaze-faced roan about ten last night. Good lookin' animal with a Triangle brand, not registered in these parts. Yuh run across Allison at the Timberlake stables, then asked about a man named Halliday. After that yuh headed for the El Dorado.

"You ran into Bob Masters an' his sister in front of Socrates Sam's. Had a bit of trouble with the Masterses. Then yuh got a room in the El Dorado. It happened to be the same room Jeff Halliday was killed in. Two hours after yuh turned in there was a shot. I was down in the hotel bar. When we came upstairs we found Bates dead in yore room."

CHAPTER V

"Keep Out of Trouble, Brennan!"

WHILE Tony finished shaving Brennan, Albright was silent. The deputy looked out the window where broken glass littered the boardwalk. A couple of onlookers fidgeted under his direct stare and moved away.

Larry Brennan sat up.

"I told yuh what I knew about that last night," he said.

"No," Albright answered. He chewed thoughtfully on the cigar stub. "Not everythin', Brennan. I know Bates was knifed before he got to yore room. He was dyin' when he got there. But somebody follered him and took a shot at you."

"Yuh're guessin', Deputy," Brennan said. The deputy made a disparaging gesture with his hands.

"I never guess," he snapped. "I was up in yore room this mornin', lookin' for yuh. Found where a slug had ripped into yore beddin'."

Brennan shrugged. "All right," he admitted. "So somebody follered Bates and took a shot at me. He missed."

The deputy smiled faintly. "Shore," he said. "It's yore hide." His eyes narrowed suddenly and his voice struck at Brennan, hard and decisive. "Yuh didn't say why yuh came to Douglas, Brennan, but I know. Yuh're a Texan—it's on the hotel register. And Halliday was expectin' help from Texas. Well—Halliday's dead. What do yuh intend doin'?"

Brennan looked at him. "Nothin'," he said shortly. "Till I get word from home."

Albright turned. He walked lazily to the door, then he stopped and looked back.

"There's trouble ridin' the Timberlake ranges," he said sharply. "Keep yore riders out of it, Brennan!"

"Is that an order?"

The lawman nodded. "Yeah. There's

too many hard characters struttin' around town as it is without a bunch of wild Texans mixin' things up. And that goes double for you, Brennan. Keep out of trouble while yuh're in town!"

The Texan's eyes hardened, but he kept his voice level.

"I don't make a habit of lookin' for it," he said coldly.

"That ain't enough!" the lawman snapped. "Keep out of it!"

He turned and went out, kicking a sliver of glass into the mud as he crossed the street.

Tony finished cutting Brennan's hair and brushed the Texan's neck and ears. Larry got up out of the chair and paid him, adding folding money for the window.

"*Muchas gracias, senor.*"

Brennan brushed aside Tony's voluble thanks.

"Who was the hombre I had trouble with?" he asked.

"Nick?" Tony opened his hands in a gesture that seemed to say everyone knew Nick Trellis. "Nick works for Charley Allison in the Casino. He deals faro."

Brennan frowned. He had sensed something behind Nick's obvious excuse in picking a quarrel. The man had come primed for trouble. Why? Larry had never run into Nick before. Evidently the gambler had been sent by someone interested in seeing that he was either scared out of Douglas or killed.

The thought annoyed the big Texan. He didn't like the way Albright had talked to him, and he resented being dragged into the trouble riding the Timberlake ranges.

He shrugged. "Well, Nick dealt himself the wrong hand this time," he said, and reached for his coat.

A man came into the shop and paused just inside the door to stare at the broken window.

"Good mornin', Meester Carson," Tony said.

The name swung Brennan around. Carson was the name on the envelope he had taken from Bates' body.

Carson was a tall, spare man with the stiff bearing of a cavalry officer and the look of a Southern colonel.

"Mawnin', Tony," he said. "Looks like you had a bit of trouble in here."

Tony was vigorously brushing the chair seat. "*Si*, Meester Carson." He glanced meaningly at Brennan.

Carson hung an expensive gray Stetson on a hook, then let his gaze rest with sharp interest on the Texan.

"So yoah the gentleman who had the trouble with Nick," he said.

LARRY BRENNAN was getting into his coat. He had not missed the heavy Southern accent, nor the note of authority in the man's voice. He turned and faced him, letting his glance take in the tough leanness of this man in expensive town clothes.

Carson was in his middle fifties, and despite his grooming he looked it. He had a long, bony face, arrogantly dominated by a hawk nose, and iron-gray hair worn long and combed back past his ears. It matched his small waxed mustache and trim goatee. A stickpin glittered in a silk cravat.

"Trouble has a habit of gettin' around fast," Brennan observed, then he nodded. "Yeah, I'm that man."

Carson allowed the obsequious Tony to help him out of his coat before answering.

"Yoah sure put yoahself in the way of trouble, suh," he said. "Nick isn't the kind of gentleman to let a thing like that go."

"Too bad for Nick," Brennan said.

Carson let a thin smile touch his lips. "Yo'all have business in Douglas?"

Brennan shrugged. "I don't know yet."

"Looking foah work?"

Larry wondered what was behind the question. "Not particularly."

Carson loosened his cravat. "I'm Mark Carson," he said, and the way he said it conveyed the depth of his arrogance. He was important and powerful, he knew it, and he expected everyone else to know it. "Drop around to my office in the bank," he said casually. "I can use a man of yoah caliber."

Brennan looked at him without interest. "Doin' what?"

"You look like a man who can't be pushed around," Carson replied. "We can use a man like you in the Citizen's Committee. A town organization," he explained briefly, "to see that justice is done. There's been an outbreak of killin's lately, and Douglas could use a town marshal who would keep order."

"What about the sheriff's office?"

Carson shrugged. "McVail and Albright have their hands full with the beginnin's of a range war. We could use a good man whose business would be to keep order in town." He paused, a sudden thought bringing a frown to his face. "You one of the new Ace of Spades riders?"

"No," Brennan said. "I'm just a stranger here."

Carson seemed relieved. He walked to the chair and sat down.

"Think it over," he said.

Larry Brennan got his hat from a hook and tipped it casually over his left eye.

"Mebbe I will," he replied shortly, and went out.

The drizzle had stopped. The gray cloud mass over town was breaking up under a high wind. The buildings had a raw wetness that gave a cheerless aspect to Brennan's glance as he headed for the telegraph office. He paused on the corner of Lodestone Avenue, his glance picking up the sign midway down the block.

Then his attention was caught by the girl on the opposite corner. She was carrying a bag piled with groceries and all Brennan could see of her face was a dinky straw hat perched above the groceries.

She hesitated, stepped gingerly down on the planks someone had laid out as a crosswalk over the muddy street, and started toward him.

Brennan saw the buckboard as he turned away. It was coming down Lodestone Avenue at a mad run. Some fool kid was standing up and whipping a team of grays and yelling like a wild Indian.

The girl heard the approaching buckboard and the boy's yells and stopped. The bag interfered with her vision. The kid saw her hesitate in the road and started to saw back on the reins. He had managed to swerve the team slightly away from her when she unaccountably began to run.

Larry Brennan swung back and ran toward her. She was still clinging to her bag of groceries and didn't see him. She ran into him, bounced back, and sat down on the crosswalk before Brennan could prevent it. Her groceries spilled in the mud.

Larry bent down and pulled her away just as the buckboard swept past. Iron tires kicked up mud that splattered them. The white-faced youngster kept going down the street without looking back.

"Fool kid!" Brennan growled, then caught himself and bent over the girl.

She was sitting on the muddy boards, surprised and breathless, not yet fully comprehending what had happened. The straw hat was crushed down over a blue eye and a bunch of carrots lay like a bouquet in her lap.

"Sorry I had to be so rough," Brennan said. "Let me help yuh up."

HE HELD out his hands to her and when she took them he pulled her to her feet.

She straightened her hat, looked down at the mud on her clothes, and grimaced.

"Ugh! I'm a mess. But I should be thankful it wasn't worse."

"Too bad about yore clothes," Brennan broke in. "But I didn't expect yuh to run and I couldn't fend yuh off." He smiled, "Can I see yuh home?"

The girl was young, not more than eighteen. She had a young girl's freshness and a woman's sadness—they were mixed up in her and the combination made her moody and shy. She was slim and small and blond—she would have been prettier if there had been less gravity and more laughter in her eyes.

She said: "I—well—yes, thank you, Mr.—"

"Brennan," Larry said. "Larry Brennan."

She acknowledged the introduction with

a fleeting smile that dimpled her cheeks.

"I'm Vanity Carson," she replied. "My father is Mark Carson."

She turned quickly as if she had said too much, and started to pick up the scattered groceries. Brennan helped her, filling his pockets with cans and vegetables. They crossed to the boardwalk.

"I'm a stranger in town, Miss Carson," Brennan said. "Yuh'll tell me where yuh—"

He stopped and looked past her to the riders coming down the street.

Bob Masters was astride a handsome buckskin, riding beside the buckboard driven by his sister. Even at this distance Larry could sense the violence in this slight youngster with the coldly handsome face and the yellow-flecked eyes. There was a restlessness in him that sought outlet even as he rode. His gaze shifted constantly from road to buildings as if he were expecting trouble and willing to meet it halfway.

Lennie Masters sat stiffly, looking straight ahead. There was a proud, almost snobbish tilt to her head, and Larry Brennan felt the unyielding quality of this girl who had fashioned a shell of bitter reserve about herself.

Her glance caught Brennan and the Carson girl as they neared. Bob saw them at the same instant. He started to swing the buckskin away from the buckboard.

Brennan felt the girl by his side tense. He glanced down at her, surprising confusion in her, then his gaze went back to the hard-faced young man. Lennie had leaned toward him and said something that brought him back by her side.

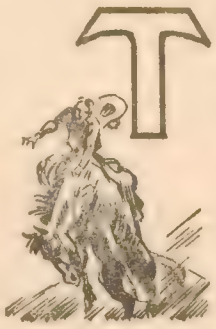
They rode past. Bob Masters looked back once and Brennan knew that Vanity Carson and not he was the object of the young fellow's glance. Then the Masters, brother and sister, turned a corner, out of sight.

Brennan looked down at Vanity. "Yuh know them?"

"Yes," she said. Her voice was soft. In that moment he sensed desire and sadness in it. "Yes, I know them well." Then she looked up and said, without emotion, "I live around the corner. Opposite the bank."

CHAPTER VI

Lennie Decides



THE Carson home was a spacious house with a Georgian front, and a quiet air of affluence. A white picket fence enclosed an acre of land, and trees shaded an expanse of lawn.

Vanity opened a small side gate and Larry Brennan followed her up a flagged walk to the rear of the house. The girl stopped.

"I'll have Susie take the groceries," she said. She rapped on the screen door and called: "Susie!"

After a while a fat Negro woman appeared. She took a look at Vanity's clothes and threw her hands up in the air.

"Miss Vanity, what done happened to yo' clothes?"

"Never mind the clothes," Vanity said firmly. "The mud will wash off. Here—take these groceries from this gentleman, and quit your wailing."

Susie grumblingly complied.

"Vanity!" a voice from inside the house called sharply. "Vanity Carson! You come right inside this minute!"

Brennan caught a glimpse of a small woman in black crinoline looming up behind the screen door.

He raised his hat. "Good day, Miss Carson."

"Good day, Mr. Brennan." She smiled shyly and went into the house.

Brennan grinned as the older woman's shocked voice came to him. "What am I going to do with you, Vanity—taking up with perfect strangers! I'll have to speak to your father."

Larry turned and went down the steps. As he was coming out onto the street, Mark Carson was just entering the front

gate. Carson stopped, looked at Brennan, then he slammed the gate and walked rapidly to the front door.

Brennan walked back to Lodestone Avenue and found the telegraph office.

The clerk was a natty fellow in silk shirt and long waxed mustache. He took the message Brennan wrote out and read it back.

" 'John Barstow, Triangle Ranch, Brazos County, Texas. Halliday dead. What next? Larry'."

Brennan paid him. "When will he get it?"

"Tomorrow," the clerk said.

"I'm stayin' at the El Dorado," Brennan informed. "I'll be around in a couple of days for the answer. But if I should be out when it comes in, leave word with the hotel clerk."

"Sure," the clerk said. "I'll see that you get it right away, Mr. Brennan."

Heels made a warning sound on the threshold. The clerk glanced up and suddenly took a step away from Brennan, his eyes wary as Charley Allison came in.

In daylight, Allison looked almost foppish. He had on a new tight-fitting coat that matched his pearl-gray Stetson, his face was impeccably barbered, and the bulge of a shoulder holster barely showed under his right arm.

The gunman who accompanied him was a lanky man with a starboard list and a low-slung gun on his right hip. He stepped aside as Allison paused, and stood watching Larry Brennan. The gunman had a piece of straw between his lips and he absently chewed on the end of it.

"I've been looking for you, Brennan," Allison said.

So Allison reads registers too, Larry thought, and shrugged.

"Yuh're lookin' right at me," he said casually. "What's on yore mind?"

"Cows," Allison said. "Let's go some place for a couple of drinks and talk it over."

Brennan glanced at the gunman lounging carelessly against the wall.

"All right," he said. "Let's go talk it over. . . ."

Socrates Sam met Bob and Lennie Masters at his door. He had been working late the night before and his eyes were tired.

"Good mornin', Lennie," he said. "Howdy, Bob."

Lennie nodded stiffly. "We've come for him, Sam."

"Yuh goin' to bury him on the Tumblin' H?" Sam said gently.

"Yes. Uncle Jeff wanted to be buried on his own land—and the Tumbling H is still his, Sam. At least until the end of the month."

"It'll always be his—and ours!" Bob said roughly.

He had been looking down at the embalmed figure in the pine wood casket, and now he turned. He was only twenty, but he looked older. He looked like a man who had never been a boy, who had passed from childhood into manhood, and the transition had been bitterly swift.

"Uncle Jeff settled on the upper Timberlake when Douglas was a cross roads town," he said. "Nobody's goin' to take his brand away from him—alive or dead!"

Sam shrugged. "Allison's got gun backin'," he said slowly. "And after the end of the month he'll have the law on his side."

"The law," Bob sneered, "has always been on his side. You know that as well as I do, Sam."

"Yuh're makin' a mistake about Albright," Sam said quietly. "He don't say much, but he's honest—an' he hates Allison. About McVail—"

"Some day I'm goin' to kill McVail," Bob said. He said it dispassionately. "I'm goin' to kill him for what happened the night I cornered Charley Allison in the Casino, right after his men ran off the last of our stock."

"Yuh could never prove it," the undertaker said. "Neither could Jeff. And McVail only did what he had to do. Because he's sheriff of this county, and you had no proof!"

"Proof!" Bob Masters' eyes flared with that yellow wildness. "I was out there the night Dan and Reilley were killed. I saw 'em. But it was my word against a dozen

of Allison's men—and McVail had to stop me when I braced Charley!" He laughed bitterly. "They think they've won now, with their legal trap. Cows on the Tumblin' H ranges by October first or Carson forecloses and the ranch goes up for auction. Cuss it, Sam, they may have the law on their side, come the first of the month, but they'll have to back it with guns!"

Socrates Sam took his pipe from his mouth and stared into the street, knowing that much of what young Masters had said was true, and that there was little that could be done about it. Sam had been Jeff's friend for thirty years—they had come into Timberlake Valley together.

"Something may happen before the end of the month," Lennie said quietly.

She was making an effort to appear unconcerned, but Sam read the helplessness in her eyes and saw behind her reserve a frightened girl who had grown up on the Tumbling H and would now be set adrift.

"Jeff told me last week he was expectin' help from an old friend in Texas," he said. "Somethin' about a herd on the trail."

Lennie nodded. "I wrote the letter for Uncle Jeff, to a man named Barstow. It was Uncle's last hope. But it looks like the herd won't get here in time—if it ever does."

Sam relighted his pipe. "If Bob wasn't so touchy," he said slowly, "yuh'd have found out last night."

Bob turned and looked at him with hard eyes. "What yuh gettin' at?"

"That big feller who slapped yuh around last night," Sam said. "His name's Larry Brennan. He's the man yore uncle's been expectin'. He's that trail boss from Texas."

Lennie said, "Oh!" in a small, surprised voice.

Bob frowned. "Why didn't he come out to the Tumblin' H?"

"Mebbe because he had instructions to meet Jeff here," Sam said.

Lennie Masters nodded. "I remember the letter. He was to take a room at the El Dorado and wait for Uncle Jeff to come to him. We'll have to see him, Bob." She turned to her brother. "Tell him we're sorry about last night."

Bob sneered, and Sam frowned.

"Bob," he said solemnly, "don't make a mistake about this Texan."

"If yuh're thinkin' about what happened last night, forget it," young Masters said.

Sam shrugged. "I wasn't thinkin' about yore run-in with him. But a lot has happened since. If he's on yore side yuh can be thankful. A tougher man never came up the Texas trail."

"What happened, Sam?" Lennie asked curiously. "You sound as if you had something to tell."

"I have," Sam said. "I heard things, here an' there. Asked questions. This Texan took a room in the El Dorado, the same room Jeff was killed in. Along 'bout one o'clock there was a shot. Albright happened to be in the hotel bar. He and some of the boys went up—and found Bates dead in Brennan's room."

"Bates!" Bob frowned. "Ain't that Allison's swamper?"

THE undertaker nodded.

"Nobody saw Bates go upstairs. But they found blood on the stairs and in the hall, just in front of this Texan's door, so they figger Bates was dyin' when he got there. How he got past Velie, the night clerk, without bein' seen is a question—but mebbe Velie was asleep. Anyway this Texan acts dumb when Albright questions him. Claims he never saw Bates in his life and didn't know why Bates come to his room."

"Sounds like the truth," Lennie said. "It is strange."

"Yes, plumb strange," Sam said, and looked at her. "Unless Bates didn't know Jeff had been killed, which is possible, and went to the El Dorado to see yore uncle."

"But why?" Lennie asked. "What could Bates have wanted with Uncle Jeff? Bates was nothing but a tramp."

"But he worked for Allison," Bob said swiftly, his eyes searching Sam's face. "What did Albright have to say about it, Sam?"

"If Albright had anythin' to say he kept

it to himself, like he always does," Sam replied. "All I know is that he brought Bates in here last night and asked me to fix him up in a box."

Bob started to pace.

"We saw Mr. Brennan this morning," Lennie said. "He was talking to the Carson girl as if he had known her all his life."

Bob turned, as if the memory hurt. "Don't say anythin' about Vanity, Lennie —not here," he said softly. "And not now!"

Lennie stiffened.

"He gets around all right," Sam broke in swiftly. "Morning wasn't half begun when he had trouble with Nick Trellis. Over in Tony's barber shop."

"I noticed Tony's window as we rode in," Bob said. "What happened?"

Sam chuckled. "Nick tried to shove Brennan around and the Texan heaved him through it."

"What?"

Sam nodded. "Nick's been havin' his way around town so long he never thought it could happen to him. He's laid up now, with his gun arm in a sling. Lucky for him he didn't break his neck."

There was silence in the mortuary.

"Uncle Jeff had something on his mind these past weeks, Sam," Lennie finally said. "Something he wouldn't even tell me. Do you know what it was?"

Sam shook his head. "'I came into Timberlake Valley with yore uncle," he replied.

Remembrance was in him of that day. He had been driving a wagon down the Timber Pass trail and pulled up to watch the lean, dour man at head of a small bunch of Texas longhorns.

"Howdy," Jeff had said. "Aimin' to settle in Douglas?"

It seemed like yesterday, but it had been all of thirty years ago.

"Good graze and good timber," Jeff had said. "Some day my cattle will graze over half this valley." Then he had looked down from his seat astride a rangy bay and smiled with dry humor. "And mebbe some day you'll be around to bury me."

All this, and the thirty years he had known Jeff Halliday, was in Sam at that moment.

Then he shrugged and said: "No—Jeff didn't tell me anythin'. He was waitin' for that Triangle herd from Texas, that's all."

"Jeff was too easy goin'," Bob said. "I told him there was only one way to fight Allison—the way he's fightin' us. It's no secret the Ace of Spades has been hirin' gunslingers. But McVail won't make a move to stop Allison, and Albright takes his orders from McVail. But I'll kill Allison first, before I let him take possession of the Tumblin' H."

"There's been enough killin'," Sam said.

He turned to the coffin where Jeff's body lay, and suddenly he looked old and a little comical in his stovepipe hat and corncob pipe.

"Yuh're not so popular in Douglas," he said finally, meeting Bob's eyes. "There's talk goin' around you killed yore uncle. The talk's growin'. The Citizen's Committee is threatenin' to take action. Bob, if I was you I'd go back to the ranch and lay low for a while till all this talk blows over."

"You don't believe Bob killed Uncle Jeff, do you?" Lennie said sharply.

"No," Sam said drily. "But what I believe ain't what the law will think, Lennie. Albright ain't sayin' anythin'—he never does. He's waitin' for McVail to get back. But there's Velie's story that he heard Bob and Jeff arguin' and—"

"Shore," Bob broke in harshly. "We had an argument. Uncle Jeff got mad and slapped me, and I hit him."

HE TURNED as Lennie made a small, startled sound.

"Yes," he said savagely. "I hit him! But I didn't kill him. Lennie, you know we never got along. And last night he said somethin' I couldn't take."

"The Carson girl?"

"Yes!" Bob snapped, white-lipped. "Vanity Carson!"

Lennie's lips pursed. "After what her father called you! After he warned you publicly to stay away from her!"

Sam placed a hand on her arm and shook his head. "This is not the place for a family quarrel. I should think yuh'd have some respect for the dead."

Lennie relaxed. "All right, Sam. It's not pretty, fighting over Jeff's body. Will you give us a hand with the coffin? We'll take him with us now."

Sam nodded. "I'll be out to the ranch tomorrow," he said. "Unless yuh'd rather be alone?"

"You know we'd like to have you," Lennie said.

The coffin was not heavy, and between them Bob and Sam carried it out to the buckboard. There Sam paused.

"If this Texan has the cattle Jeff was waitin' for, he came just in time," he suggested.

Bob glanced down the street. "Yuh say he's stayin' at the El Dorado?"

Sam nodded. "Don't forget what I said, Bob. He's not one to be pushed—"

"I'll be nice to him!" Bob sneered. "I'll handle him with kid gloves!"

Lennie was getting into the buckboard, but she stopped, as if Bob's tone had crystallized a decision in her. She came back and held Bob's arm as he prepared to mount the buckskin.

"I'll see Brennan," she said. Her voice was quietly determined. "You take the buckboard back to the ranch." She brushed aside Bob's protests. "We've had enough trouble. I'll handle this my way."

She waited until Bob climbed angrily into the buckboard and drove away. Then she mounted Bob's horse.

"We'll be expecting you and Sarah tomorrow, Sam," she said.

Sam watched her ride down the street, stiff and erect. After a while he shook his head and went back inside.

NEXT ISSUE

THE HIDE HUNTER

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AND OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER VII

Open Break

LARRY BRENNAN followed Allison and his gun hireling, Johnson, to the Casino, a false-fronted structure on the corner of Main and Texas Avenue.

The big gambling hall was deserted at this early morning hour. Faro and monte tables were covered, the roulette wheels stilled. A half-dozen hard-eyed customers lounged against the long bar, listening idly to a small, silk-shirted individual with gaudy arm bands playing on the piano.

Wide stairs curved up to an open balcony. Nick Trellis was coming down these stairs. He saw Larry Brennan and stopped. He watched Brennan cross the room to the bar with Allison and Johnson. Then he turned and went back upstairs.

Brennan noticed the gambler and wariness came into the Texan. He loosened his coat and kept his eye on the open balcony as he walked to the bar. The bartender, a raw-boned man with drooping handlebar mustaches, scurried over.

"Get me a bottle of Old Taylor," Allison said. "And three glasses."

The bartender brought the bottle and glasses and Allison took them and turned toward the table.

"Let's sit down, Brennan," he said pleasantly. "It's friendlier."

Brennan shrugged. He took a seat so that he faced the balcony. Johnson, the hired gunslinger, pulled out a chair, reversed it, and sat down, resting his long arms across the top. He faced Brennan across the table, his eyes blank and unsmiling.

Allison filled the glasses.

"Nothing like having a drink from private stock," he said conversationally. "I own the Casino and I always make sure my friends get the best."

Brennan leaned back in his chair. "Yuh didn't bring me here to drink good whisky," he said. "What's on yore mind?"

Allison smiled. "Cows."

He took a cigar from his vest pocket, held it out to the Texan. Brennan shook his head. Allison shrugged, unhurriedly cut off one end of the smoke with a small pocket knife, and lighted it.

"You brought a herd up the trail," he opened. "I want to buy it."

"It ain't for sale," Brennan said.

"I'll give you a good price. More'n you can get anywhere in the section."

"They're still not for sale."

Allison frowned. The gunman at his side chewed thoughtfully, his eyes on Brennan. The piano tinkled softly in the big room.

"Look!" the Ace of Spades Ranch owner said bluntly. "I'm going to lay my cards face up on the table. I know you came up the trail with cows for Halliday. Well—Halliday's dead. That leaves you with a herd on your hands. I'm willing to pay you five dollars a head over and above the market price. In cash. And I'll take your tally."

Larry Brennan took his time answering. He was wondering how much these Triangle cows meant in this game being played for control of the Timberlake range. Halliday had indicated in his letter he needed the cattle or he would go broke. And now, the boss of the Ace of Spades was making his bid. Brennan had to admit it was a pretty strong bid.

"They're not mine to sell," he finally answered. "I just work for the Triangle. I don't own it."

"You're the trail boss," Allison persisted. "You came up here and found the man you were to deliver the herd to dead. A thousand miles. Why sweat out another thousand trailing them back? It's not good business."

"No," Brennan agreed. "It's not good business. But I had orders to turn them cows over to Halliday. And till I get different orders they'll stay where they are."

Anger reddened Allison's face, the anger of a man not used to being balked.

"You're a hard man to do business with, Brennan," he snapped, losing his temper. "Don't forget—there are other ways. A stampede some dark night—" he looked across at Brennan, his eyes hard and unfriendly now—"and the cows you sweated to bring out here will be scattered over half of Colorado!"

Brennan stiffened. "Thanks for tellin' me."

"You still refuse?"

"I said that beef wasn't mine to sell!" the Texan said angrily.

He hadn't asked for chips in this game. He had come on a purely routine job to deliver a bunch of cows to a man named Halliday. But he had a stubborn streak and Allison's threat rubbed him the wrong way.

"Yuh wanted to talk business—yuh got my answer!" He tossed a coin on the table and started to get up. "That's for the drink," he said contemptuously. "I only let my friends treat."

"Yuh goin' to let this sidewinder get away with it, Charley?" the lanky gunman with the poker face said.

BRENNAN lunged across the table and got a fistful of the gunman's vest and shirt and jerked him halfway across the table.

"All right!" he snapped. "Yuh been sittin' here, lookin' tough and sayin' nothin'. What are yuh goin' to do about it?"

Johnson jerked loose and started to rise. Brennan cuffed him to the floor. And in that same moment Nick Trellis appeared on the balcony, a gun in his left hand.

His first shot splintered into the table in front of Brennan, his second went up into the ceiling as the Texan's bullet tore into him. He took a step forward, fell against the railing, and toppled over. He landed with a sodden thud on top of the piano.

The piano player fell backward off his stool when the body hit, his last chords fading into the jarring discord caused by Trellis' fall.

Larry Brennan remained crouched, a wisp of smoke curling up from his long-barreled Colt. The lanky gunman was on the floor, not moving. Allison was stiff in his chair, his hands in plain sight, his lips tight around his cigar.

The Texan's cold eyes ranged to the men standing rigid at the bar and the threat in his eyes held them motionless. His glance came back to Allison.

"I don't like bein' strong-armed into business deals!" he said flatly. "And I don't like bein' set up as a target. Next time yuh hire a man to do a job see that yuh get one who can shoot straight."

Allison wet his lips.

"You got anythin' more to say?" Brennan snapped.

"No!" The Ace of Spades owner's voice was soft—and dangerous. "Nothing more to say."

"Then I'll speak my piece," Brennan said tightly. "If somethin' happens to that Triangle herd somebody's goin' to get hurt. Remember that, Allison. If yuh want trouble, try runnin' off them cows. There's a bunch of Texans who'll see that yuh get it, even if we have to ride out to yore ranch to bring it to yuh!"

"That's big talk." Allison smiled faintly. "I'll remember it."

Larry Brennan sneered. His glance flicked to the men at the bar, then came back to the white-faced gunman who had not moved from where he had been cuffed to the floor.

"Yuh've got a big mouth—when yuh open it," he said softly. "I'm goin' to give yuh yore chance to back yore talk."

The Texan holstered his Colt and stood there, waiting. And then, when no one moved, he backed slowly to the doors, turned, and went out.

Brennan left the Casino and walked swiftly back to the El Dorado where he found the day clerk filing mail in pigeonholes behind the desk.

"I'm leavin' town for a day or two," he said. "If the Law comes lookin' for me, tell him I'll be back. If a telegram comes in, hold it for me."

He turned and went out, walking with long strides toward the livery stable. The sun was warm in the streets of Douglas, baking the mud, hardening the ruts in the road. He was not interrupted, and five minutes later he rode out of the Timberlake stables.

He left Douglas the way he had entered it. Once out of town he swung west along the river trail. A half-hour later he forded the wide, shallow Timberlake River at Pebbly Crossing and turned the roan south toward higher ground.

The wind had shredded the clouds, and sunlight patched the valley. There was a clean freshness in the air, as if yesterday's rain had washed it free of dust and odor.

TIMBERLAKE VALLEY at this point was a vast trough, its wooded slopes more than ten miles apart. The foothills in the north went mounting up to the high, rocky peaks of the San Miquels. To the south the timber and the grassy meadows gave way to wilder country that gullied down to the Mesa Seco badlands.

Brennan rode south along an old wagon road and when it branched off east he left it and kept going south. He rode by landmark now, keeping the crest of a bald knob to his left front.

He let the roan jog along, sitting easily between horn and rim, letting his thoughts go through him. There was going to be trouble and Duke and the boys would have to be warned. Allison's threat had been no idle remark. The flashily dressed rancher had something big at stake, and a handful of Texans a thousand miles from home would not stop him.

He was an hour out of Douglas when he saw the rider. He had been forced into a cutback by a wall or rock and his idle glance picked up the speck crossing a clearing between timber.

Warning prickled in him. Allison was losing no time, he thought grimly, and a hard smile touched the corner of his mouth.

He let the roan take its own pace, the way it had since leaving Douglas. Fifteen minutes later he rode down into a wide gully whose further bank was fringed

with brush and small timber. A rider intent on haste might be fooled into thinking he had pushed on across the gully, his passage screened by the brush.

CHAPTER VIII

"Goin' Some Place?"

DISMOUNTING, Brennan led the roan toward a shielding mesquite tree on the near bank, and tied the animal there. The bank was high enough to top him as he stood erect and it would hide them both effectively from anyone riding his trail.

Squatting on his heels, he slid his Colt into his hand and waited.

The sun beat down into the gully. Wind made a soft, caressing sound in the brush. A lizard came out of a hole in the embankment, slithered a few feet across the pale sand and paused to eye the motionless Texan with beady gaze.

A sound disturbed it. It darted back, paused to look back, then whisked into its hole.

The sound of a running horse came plainly now. There was no caution in the sound—only haste. It drew nearer, then slowed for the gully. A rider loomed up on the bank. The buckskin minced a moment on the edge, then sat back on its haunches and slid down.

Larry Brennan came forward swiftly, the Colt in his hand glinting in the sunlight.

"Goin' some place?" he asked roughly.

The buckskin reared skittishly at his sudden approach. The rider, caught by surprise, was twisted out of saddle.

Brennan holstered his gun and took a step forward. A cream sombrero had slipped from black hair and lay beside the crumpled figure.

It was Lennie Masters!

He bent and slid an arm under her, raising her head and shoulders from the sand. The fall had stunned her. He brushed back hair from her face and touched the bruise near her temple.

She was soft in his arm. The cold reserve was gone from her and she looked appealingly small and girlish now. He remembered the way she had looked last night, her lips curled unpleasantly. They were full and soft now and he had the sudden, unfounded thought that she had never been kissed.

He eased her down then, and went back to his cayuse. The canteen slung from his saddle was full. He brought it back and knelt beside her. Her eyes flickered as he raised her up again.

"Here," he said. "Drink some of this."

He put the canteen to her lips and she gulped, then turned her head away. He let a few drops fall on the soft curve of her throat.

Her eyes searched his face, clouded and uncertain.

"I'm sorry I frightened yuh," he said. "I expected somebody else."

He felt her body stiffen against his arm. She pulled away from him and sat up. He felt her hostility and a spasm of anger went through him. Bending, he lifted her roughly to his feet. He had no interest in her, nor in her troubles.

"That wasn't a smart thing to do, Miss Masters," he said coldly. "I might have shot first and asked questions afterwards."

The girl's face was close to him and his hands were tight on her arms. He saw the hardness melt from her, as if his tone, his strength, had ripped the shell of self-containment from her. For a moment there was something soft and appealing in her. Then she pulled away from him and her cold reserve was between them again, an unscalable wall.

"I tried to get you at the El Dorado," she explained brusquely. "I wanted to apologize for what happened last night."

There was little apology in her tone, and Brennan shrugged. He turned and walked to the buckskin which had sought the company of his roan. He caught the trailing reins and led the animal back to

the girl.

"We were all pretty touchy last night," he said. "Let's forget it."

Lennie Masters ran probing fingers over the bruise on her face. She made a little grimace and dropped her fingers. Her hair was loose and naturally wavy. It fell like a black cloud on her shoulders.

"Sam told us who you were," she said. "That's why I followed you. I want those cattle you trailed here from Texas. The cows you were to deliver to my uncle, Jeff Halliday."

Brennan shook his head. Her brusque, confident tone annoyed him.

"Yuh made a mistake," he said levelly.

The girl frowned. " You *are* the Texan my uncle was expecting? You did come into Timberlake Valley with a herd?"

He nodded.

"When can you run them onto Tumbling H grass?" she demanded coldly.

"When I get an answer from my boss," he replied. His tone was short. "My instructions were to deliver to Halliday. There's over five hundred head involved."

"But we're Halliday's legal heirs!" the girl interrupted. "I wrote that letter for my uncle to Barstow, and we got his wire telling us you were on the way. My uncle was killed before you arrived—but that doesn't change the picture here. Nor the need for those cows, Mr. Brennan. Without those cattle we lose the Tumbling H."

Brennan was unmoved. "That's not my problem," he said. "If Barstow wants yuh to have the cattle, he'll tell me. Yuh'll get 'em then."

SHE looked at him with sudden contempt.

"I guess Socrates Sam was wrong about you."

"I don't know what Sam told yuh," Brennan said drily. "But I can't turn over them cows to yuh till I get an answer from Barstow."

Color came into her face, breaking the immobility of her features.

"You're the stubbornest man I've ever met—if stubbornness it is that explains your action!"

He reached out and picked her off her feet and placed her in the buckskin's saddle. His motion had been swift and unexpected and it left her temporarily speechless. He stepped back and looked up at her, a smile touching his lips.

"For a woman, yuh're too bossy. Yuh been givin' too many orders, and sometimes, for a woman, that's bad."

"Not half as bad," she said angrily, "as a man who can't see anything but his own way!" She took the reins in her hands and looked down at him, her eyes dark and full of emotion. "The Tumbling H hasn't much left, except land. We've been rustled blind. Some of our best men have been shot. The riders we have left are not gunfighters. But we're going to fight. We're going to fight for every inch of the Tumbling H, for every blade of grass, every shack!"

"Yuh'll get the herd," Brennan cut in, "when Barstow says so."

The girl's hands tightened on the reins.

[*Turn page*]

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'We'll get those cows, Brennan," she said passionately, "even if we have to come for them! Remember that—even if we have to come for them!"

The buckskin whirled on its hind legs and scrambled back up the bank. Larry Brennan waited, listening to the drumbeat of the animal's hoofs fade into the warm stillness. Then he walked to the roan and mounted.

This was the second threat against the herd this morning, and stubbornness rode hard in him. That Triangle herd seemed to have become the focus of the range trouble in Timberlake, and until he got Barstow's wire he and the boys would do well to be on their toes. . . .

It was well along in the afternoon when Brennan pulled up at the entrance of a canyon where the crumbly slopes were brush-grown and baking in the sun. He had long since left the watered, timbered valley to the north. Southward the earth sloped down into the Mesa Seco sinks, a barren wasteland of sere buttes blue-hazed and remote against the horizon.

Brennan looked expectantly along the frowning cliff wall and felt a stab of annoyance when he saw no one. Duke and the boys were not expecting trouble, but it would have been a wise move to have posted a man on the cliffs overlooking the canyon mouth.

He skirted the north shoulder, noting that the recent rain had been brief here, for it had not erased the tracks of the Triangle herd. His glance followed the hoof-ploughed trail into the wasteland. He had come in from the southwest, following Halliday's instructions. The herd had swung off the Platte River trail seventy miles south of Douglas and made a wide arc through the Mesa Seco badlands to reach this canyon Halliday had marked with an X on his map.

The Tumbling H owner had wanted secrecy, and Brennan now knew why he had been so cautious. Despite these precautions Allison had known why Brennan had come up the trail with Texas cattle, and from now on vigilance would be the watchword.

The roan pricked its ears as it jogged into the canyon, sensing water and companionship ahead. Halliday had called this long, crooked slash into the red mesa land "Lost Springs Canyon." Brennan had explored it cursorily after the Triangle herd had been bedded down.

The canyon bellied out just past the narrow mouth. The springs were here, flowing abruptly from the base of the west wall, watering a small oasis before seeping into the rocky earth. There was water and feed here for a few days more. Beyond that the Triangle herd would have to go on short rations.

Six men were lolling about a small fire and a chuckwagon when Brennan rode up. The Triangle herd was grazing contentedly along the eastern wall. Two riders rode leisurely among them. Hank Sommers, the cook, was in the chuckwagon.

Duke Sayer got to his feet and followed Brennan to the chuckwagon. Brennan dismounted and started to strip saddle and gear from the roan and Duke grinned.

"We've been waiting for you since sun-up," he said. "How did you like the sinful town of Douglas, Larry?"

DUKE was tall and slight and long-legged. He was nearing thirty, but he looked like a youngster of twenty, with his boyish features and wavy brown hair. He had come to the Tumbling H green—an awkward Easterner with a Harvard accent, a habit of meticulous grooming, and an eagerness to learn. Three years later he had been Brennan's right hand man on the trail—a quick thinker and a man who could ride with the best of them.

Brennan pulled his gear from the roan's back and slapped the animal on the rump. The roan tossed its head, gave a pleased whinny, and went galloping to join the remuda grazing past the far spring.

"Not as bad as Abilene," Brennan said, "and bigger'n Willow Junction." He reached into his saddle-bags and drew out a couple of quarts of whisky. "Pass 'em along. . . . No, wait!" He held onto a quart. "I'd better turn one over to Hank

for safekeepin'."

Duke grinned. "You know what Hank will do with it. He'll drink it, then swear he used it in his baking."

"Keep an eye on him then," Brennan said. He fished in his coat pocket and drew out a half-dozen cigars. "Here's a couple of them English cigars to keep yuh happy."

"Thanks, Larry." Duke took the cigars, then his eyes went serious. "What's happened? Something gone wrong?"

Brennan shrugged. The others were coming up. Hank came out of the chuckwagon, wiping his hands on a greasy apron.

"If I get my hands on the night-prowlin' galoot that swiped the last of my applejack I'll. . . . Howdy, Larry. When do we get to town? I'm runnin' out of grub feedin' this bunch of no-good—"

"Sure," Duke broke in eagerly. "We're getting tired of laying around, Larry. When do we break camp?"

"I don't know," Brennan said. Then, as Duke frowned, he added, "Halliday's dead!"

The others came crowding around. Brennan watched them, weighing them against the trouble that was coming. They were a diverse group, but they had been hand picked. He had known them all for more than two years—good men on the trail and good men in a scrap.

There was "Beefy" Burns who had been riding for the Triangle for more than ten years. Beefy was five feet four in his runover boots, and almost as wide. Like a lot of heavy men he was surprisingly agile, tireless on the trail, a good drag man and none better in a fight.

"Chuck" Wallis, tawny-haired and blue-eyed, was about Brennan's age. He was slim to the point of fragility, which was an illusion. He was tougher than most men, talked little, worked hard. He wasn't good with a six-gun, but he could usually hit a running target at three hundred yards with the Winchester he kept oiled and dust-protected in his saddle-boot.

"Red" Marder was older than all of them except Hank—a quiet, rangy man who had been with the Triangle as long as Beefy had. He had been married once, but lost his wife and only child when his wagon had tipped over while crossing the San Saba in a flood.

"Carp" Burton was a small, wiry man with a mouth like the fish from which he got his nickname. He was a cold-blooded, reserved man in his thirties—but he wore his six-gun thonged low on his left hip. And for a southpaw, Brennan had seen few men get a shooting iron out quicker.

Brennan's eyes rested briefly on the last man to join the group. "Parson" Johnny Brown was eighteen now. He had come to the Triangle four years back, riding chuckline. Wing Lee, the Chinese cook, had given him some grub and Barstow had come upon him, wolfing the food down. He had taken a liking to the kid and given him a job, helping Lee in the kitchen. This was Johnny's first trail drive and Brennan wondered how he would react to gun trouble.

Duke broke into his train of thought. "Where does that leave us, Larry?"

"Holdin' a mess of trouble," Brennan said.

CHAPTER IX

Preparations for Trouble

QUIETLY BRENNAN walked to the fire and hunkered down. The others gathered around and watched him pour himself a cup of coffee. They looked expectant and eager. They were tired of inactivity, and were ready to welcome trouble.

Between sips of coffee, Brennan explained what had happened to him in Douglas.

"I wired Barstow for instructions," he finished. "In the meantime we sit tight. If Allison comes lookin' for trouble we'll give it to him."

He finished his coffee and got up.

"We'll keep out of trouble—if we can," he told the men. "But the days of loafin' around here are over. We're goin' to keep a two-man watch on the cliffs by the canyon mouth, and a night guard around the herd. Allison's men'll know they've run into somethin' if they try to stampede this herd."

Beefy grinned. "Sounds like old times on the Triangle, Larry. Reminds me of the time the J Circle Dot tried to push through Kiowa Pass and block us from Clear Springs. The old man rode with us that night."

He was squatting on his heels, drawing tight the draw-strings of a Bull Durham sack. He got up now, pocketing the tobacco with one hand, rolling the cigarette deftly between the fingers of the other.

"Guess I'll ride out to the herd and send Jim and Steve in," he said.

Hank wiped his hands in his apron, an unconscious gesture with him.

"I'll fix yuh up some grub, Larry," he offered. "Got some beans and a side of beef." He turned toward the chuckwagon and caught sight of Johnny. "Thought I told yuh to rustle in some firewood," he growled. "Get goin' afore it gets dark!"

Brennan watched the young fellow disappear. Most of the others drifted off. Duke handed Brennan a cigarette and held a light for him. Larry took a deep puff.

"What's on your mind, Larry?" Duke asked.

The Triangle trail boss took the letter from his pocket and handed it to Duke.

"Bates was killed because of this," he said.

Duke's eyes flicked over the concise message.

"So the Kansas-Pacific is building through Timberlake?" He looked up at Brennan. "A lot depends on where the K-P plans to drive its survey stakes. This doesn't say. But someone stands to make a lot of money here."

Brennan frowned. "Halliday must have got wind of the deal," he said. "Bates came to the El Dorado to sell this letter to him."

"Who was Bates?"

"Seems like he was an old bum Allison hired to clean up in the Casino."

Duke took a deep puff on his cigarette. "This letter is addressed to Carson. You say he owns the bank in Douglas? Then how did Bates, a hanger-on in the Casino, get hold of it?"

"I don't know," Brennan said. "Unless Allison had it in the Casino."

Duke took the cigarette out of his mouth, looked at it thoughtfully before flicking the butt into the fire.

"That seems to tie this banker, Carson, in with Allison," he said. Brennan said nothing and Duke added, "Who is Carson?"

Brennan shrugged. "Looks and speaks like a Southern colonel, talks as if he owns Douglas, and heads a Citizens Committee which wants to clean up the town. He offered me the job of town marshal."

Duke's eyes lightened. "You sure got around."

Brennan made no comment. He was silent and preoccupied.

"Think the old man will call us back?" Duke said after a while.

"I don't know." Brennan took a last drag on his butt, his eyes on the two riders jogging toward the wagon. He was thinking of Lennie Masters at that moment and the thought was behind his answer. "I hope not, Duke. I'd like to see this thing through. . . ."

The next morning Larry Brennan said to Duke:

"I'll be back as soon as I get the old man's wire. Sit tight here and be ready for trouble. If somethin' happens, send a man to Douglas for me. I'll be stayin' at the El Dorado."

Duke nodded. "Chuck's taking the first watch on the cliff. Rest of the boys are getting their guns oiled. It might be a false alarm, but it gives us something to do while waiting. Be seeing you, Larry. Take care of yourself."

"I will," Brennan said, and jogged out of the canyon.

He turned to wave at Chuck, then

touched heels to the roan's flanks and sent the mount loping north.

He had studied Halliday's rough map of the country and gained an idea of where the Tumbling H was located. He did not ride back the way he had come, but cut across a tongue of the Sinks, heading for a line of ragged hills that made a blue-hazed barrier against the badlands.

HE WAS curious to know just how important that Triangle herd was to the Tumbling H. He wanted to talk to Lennie Masters again, fit that Kansas-Pacific letter into the pattern of the trouble here.

He crossed the low hills at midday and paused to light a small fire and warm left-over beans and beef. Squatting there he felt a sudden prickle down his back. It was the sharp feeling of someone watching. He rose, kicked out the fire, and mounted. He swung the roan around and looked back the way he had come.

The jumbled hills were empty and hot in the noon sun. He was getting jumpy, he thought. But the feeling that someone was following him nagged at his nerves.

It was midafternoon when he came through a low pass and hit the river. The Timberlake came tumbling down out of the snow-capped San Miguels, cutting a deep chasm in the rocks at this point. It was a swift, narrow stream here, deep and turbulent. Three miles downriver the gorge planed out into the long valley and here the river lost its power and widened to respectable proportions.

Brennan rode to the edge of the gorge. The ledge fell fifty feet to the water below. Upstream a spur of the chasm caused the river to hook outward, away from this cutback in the gorge. Directly below him the water was comparatively still and deep, but twenty yards from the ledge the current frothed whitely in its hurry.

Brennan let his gaze move across the narrow chasm to the buildings of the Tumbling H, standing like toy blocks on a grassy saddle between timbered hills. Halliday had picked out a site for his spread with a cattleman's eye. From the ranchhouse grassland ran to the river bottoms and behind the Texan the foothills lifted to the San Miguels whose slopes offered ideal summer grazing.

Timber Pass was a notch in the sky behind the Tumbling H. It was the natural route into the long valley from the plains and Brennan had the sudden conviction that if a railroad should be built through the valley it would come this way.

There was a fording on Halliday's map about four miles downriver.

"We'll make it well before dark," he said, reaching over to scratch the roan's left ear.

A bullet went *pssst!* past his face at the same instant. The faint crack of a rifle hung like an exclamation point to the sullen booming of the river.

Larry Brennan jerked back on the reins, seeking to maneuver the roan away from the chasm. The animal stumbled on a slick spot and suddenly kneeled.

The second shot drew blood across Brennan's arm. He went out of saddle on the lee side of the struggling animal, his Colt sliding into his hand. He heard the third bullet thunk into the roan, saw a faint wisp of smoke rise from the west shoulder of the Pass.

He was on the edge of the chasm, with the fifty-foot drop at his back, and it was no place for leisurely observation. The roan was screaming with pain. Larry tried to get away from its crazed lungings, but the roan scrambled to its feet and unaccountably turned toward him.

The animal's shoulder just grazed him as it plunged past. The blow spun Brennan around. He tried desperately to keep his balance, but his right foot slipped on the edge and he fell. He felt pain shoot through his right leg as he scraped rock, then he hit the pool just behind and to the left of the roan.

He hit the water in a sprawl, felt it slap his face, and he had only one thought —to protect himself from the threshings of the dying animal.

Something hit his shoulder a numbing blow while he was under water. Then he broke surface and felt the undercurrent

tug at him, pulling him away from the slick gorge wall.

The roan was threshing around further away. Brennan set his teeth and struck out for a half-submerged ledge under the chasm wall. . . .

Ira Johnson came down to the edge of the gorge, his rifle resting across the crook of his arm. He looked down to where Larry Brennan had plunged into the river. There was nothing below him, but something swirled briefly in the grip of the current as it swept around the bend, and he shrugged, his lips curling with dark satisfaction.

He had followed Brennan from Douglas, with orders to hold back his trigger finger until he found where the Texan was holding the Triangle herd.

"Charley'll be glad to know that Brennan's out of the way," he thought. Then he shrugged and turned back up the slope to where he had hidden his horse.

It was a long ride to the Ace of Spades where Charley Allison was waiting, and he guessed that Allison would order the raid tonight. The thought made him scowl and he bit through the straw in his mouth and spat it out. Well, orders were orders. . . .

SHERIFF JIM McVAIL opened his office and hung his hat on the hook by his desk. It was early morning and Albright was not yet up. McVail was glad of this. He had come back to Douglas late last night and there were things on his mind he wanted to iron out before he talked to his keen-witted deputy.

He pulled his chair out from under the old rolltop and sat down, his rangy frame slumping against the chair back. He had been gone a week, and now he was impatient to get on with what he had to do.

He was a quiet man in his late forties. Long ago McVail had come to accept the disfiguring scar on his left cheek. It was a long, puckered slash that twisted his face and gave him a bitter look.

He had drifted into Douglas five years back with a letter of recommendation from Sheriff Donahue in Cristobal and another from the Governor of Kansas. Saunders, then sheriff in Douglas, had taken him on as a deputy, and when later Saunders resigned and left the valley McVail had been appointed sheriff.

It had been five years of slowly gathering trouble, and now it was about to break. He felt caught in the impending storm and hampered by a decision he would soon have to make. It was not an easy one and he dreaded the outcome.

He shook off his worrying thoughts and reached for the tobacco jar on his desk. He was filling his pipe when Mark Carson came in.

McVail turned and looked at the banker, letting the silence run between them, feeling the cold enmity in the other man.

"Must be important to get you here this early, Mark," he finally said, waving to a chair. "What's on yore mind?"

Carsons remained standing. "When did you get back?"

"Late last night. Why?"

"Then yo' heard about Jeff being killed?"

"No!" McVail sat up, surprised. "No, I didn't hear about it. Who killed him?"

Carson smiled, a thin cruel twist of lips as if he wanted to savor the impact of his revelation .

"Bob Masters!"

CHAPTER X

The Law Moves

McVAIL stiffened as Bob Masters' name went through him, bringing him up out of his chair. There was unbelief in him, and then anger came briefly to his eyes, narrowing his lids.

"Yuh shore of that, Mark?" he demanded.

"I wouldn't be heah if I wasn't," Carson said coldly. "That's why I'm glad yo're back. I wanted to see you first. befoah we took action. It's yoah

job, but yoah've been easy with that wild kid too long, McVail. Far too long. The honest citizens of Douglas are tiahed of these killings, of all this trouble, and we're going to stop it, even if we have to—"

"Meanin' who by 'we'?" McVail interrupted.

"Meaning the Citizens Committee," Carson snapped. "We're not going to stand for this sort of thing in Douglas. The day of the gunman has gone. Irresponsible killers like young Masters have to be curbed."

"Why single out Masters?" McVail said. "You know as well as I do the kind of men Allison has been hirin' lately. Why not make a clean job of it?"

Carson sneered. "I know yo'-all would try to cover up for the boy. Why, I don't know. He's a no-good orphan who should have been jailed long ago." He paused, watching the look on McVail's face, waiting to hear the lawman speak. Then, when the sheriff said nothing, he went on. "Shoah—I'll tell you why I'm singling out young Masters. Because Jeff was my friend and I want to see the man who killed him hung. That's why I'm going to see that Masters is brought to justice."

"Are yuh shore there ain't another reason?" McVail cut in harshly. "Ain't it because yore daughter is in love with the boy—"

"Love—bah!" the banker spat. "Vanity is just a child. That young killer turned her head befoah I found out she was seeing him. But that's over with, McVail. I've settled that. Vanity's going away to school—in Virginia—as soon as I can get her packed!"

"Just like that, eh?" McVail said, turning back to the desk and thumbing tobacco into his pipe. The scar on his face made him look particularly bitter in that moment. "Carson," he said, turning and looking at the arrogant banker, "some day that sanctimonious, self-righteous cloak yuh've got yoreself wrapped up in is goin' to smother yuh, just as it already smothered every shred of humanity in yuh."

Carson's lips curled. "Yo' sound like a preacher, and I didn't come heah to listen to a sermon." He pointed a demanding finger at the lawman. "I want yo' to bring this Masters in, to have him stand trial for the killing of Halliday. If you don't, we will. And I won't be able to vouch for the temper of the Committee members, or the swiftness with which they may decide to mete out justice."

"Justice?"

"Yes, McVail—justice."

Carson paused in the doorway and turned to deliver a parting ultimatum.

"Better have Masters in jail tonight, McVail. Or the Committee will ride tomorrow. . . ."

Fifteen minutes after Carson left Albright came into the office. He paused when he saw McVail at the desk, and a smile broke the grim line of his mouth.

"Glad to see yuh back, Jim."

"Thanks, Al," McVail said in a preoccupied tone. Then he turned and looked at his deputy, veiling his thoughts behind the smoke from his pipe. "Seems like things have been happenin' while I was out of town."

Albright threw his hat carelessly on the bunk. "Yeah," he said shortly, frowning a little. "Halliday was killed two days ago, in the El Dorado."

"I heard about it," McVail replied. "Carson was just in here, givin' me some plain talk. Threatened to use the Citizens Committee if we didn't get action." He took the pipe out of his mouth and watched Albright sprawl on the bunk, his back against the wall. "Did Bob Masters kill Halliday?"

Albright shrugged. "Looks that way, Jim. He was up in Halliday's room just before Jeff was killed. Velie, the El Dorado night clerk, said he could hear 'em arguin' clear down into the lobby. When Bob came downstairs Velie noticed he was bleedin' a little at the mouth, like he was cut. That got him curious. First chance he got he went upstairs. He found Jeff lyin' on the floor, and ran to get me."

The deputy reached in his pocket for the makings and talked while he rolled a smoke.

"Jeff was clubbed to death, Jim. Don't see how anybody but Masters could have done it. I checked with Velie and a couple of men who were in the lobby at the time it happened. They're shore nobody went upstairs between the time Bob left and when Velie found Jeff dead."

"How about the roomers in the El Dorado?"

"Questioned every one of 'em," Albright said. "If one of 'em killed Jeff, I'll turn in my star tomorrow." He shook his head. "Nobody had any reason for killin' Jeff, outside of Ace of Spades men. I talked with Ned at the Timberlake stables and he says Allison rode into Douglas about eleven—two hours after Jeff was killed—and he was plumb surprised to hear that Halliday was dead."

"Reckon that's it, then," McVail said.

HIS voice had a strange ring to it, and Albright had a peculiar feeling that McVail was acting like a trapped man, forced into doing something he did not like. He watched McVail get up and reach for his hat.

"Let's go get him," the sheriff said.

Albright straightened. "Masters?"

McVail nodded. Albright came to his feet.

"He's goin' to be a hard man to bring in, Jim." He frowned and unconsciously took a hitch at his gun belt. "The Tumblin' H riders are behind him in this. I saw their foreman, Bill Tate, yesterday, and he was pretty riled. He don't think Masters killed Jeff."

"I don't think he killed Halliday either," McVail cut in quietly. "But he's a hot-headed youngster with an itchy trigger finger primed for range war with the Ace of Spades. Jailin' him will be the best way to keep him out of trouble. I've got a few moves of my own to make, Al, and I don't want him forcin' my hand too soon."

Albright picked up his hat. "Yuh find what you went after?"

McVail nodded. "Come on. I'll tell yuh on the way."

* * * * *

"... we give unto Thee his spirit. May it rest in peace."

Lennie Masters looked fixedly at the pine coffin being lowered into the grave. Bob was at her side, lean and quiet, his arm touching hers and somehow drawing understanding from her. He had argued and rebelled against his soft tempered uncle, but now that Jeff was gone the sense of a personal loss was in him, as it was in Lennie, his sister.

They had grown up here on the Tumbling H. They knew the game trails that led into the foothills, the pools where the steelheads lurked in the Timberlake. And always, at the end of a day of play, there had been the welcome of the sprawling stone-and-log ranchhouse to come to and the sight of Jeff smoking contentedly on the porch that faced downvalley and upon the Halliday acres.

Socrates Sam's voice droned on, reading from a pocket Bible. The words seemed to rake up all the memories in Lennie, and she felt a lump rise in her throat.

Bob stirred beside her and she felt the restlessness in this wild boy who was her brother, into whose care her mother had placed him.

She was thinking how the coming of Allison had broken the peace of the Tumbling H. Halliday had spent less and less time smoking on the porch. And now he was dead. Killed by some assailant who had brutally clubbed him to death.

She looked at Bob, knowing his temper. Then she thrust the thought from her, ashamed for having even momentarily entertained it.

They were on a grassy knoll where there was another grave, marked by a small headstone and carefully tended flowers. The knoll afforded a magnificent view of the river, and Mary Masters, who when alive had come here often, had asked to be buried in this quiet spot.

On the far side of the grave the Tumbling H riders stood silent and awkwardly bowed. Sarah Luce, Sam's portly wife, stood close to Lennie.

Sam finished reading and closed his book. Two Tumbling H riders began to spade earth onto the coffin. Lennie stif-

fened slightly and Sarah placed a sympathetic hand on her arm. Sam looked down at the earth falling on the coffin.

"I knew Jeff for thirty years," he said. "Knew him when he was a young man with less than a hundred head of longhorns and a dream about a ranch in the Timberlake."

"Sorry to interrupt, folks. Just take it easy an' there won't be any trouble."

The voice intruded sharply into that sober gathering, stilling Sam's simple eulogy. Heads turned toward the ranch path.

Albright stood on a small rock commanding the knoll. He was relaxed, the inevitable cigar stub in his mouth. He held his rifle rather casually. McVail came up the path, pushing into view, his face holding no expression other than his fixed, sardonic look.

"Yuh're under arrest, Bob," he said flatly. "For the murder of yore Uncle Jeff."

The young fellow quivered. Lennie felt the wildness surge up in him, sensed his sudden decision, and fear choked her into temporary non-activity.

Albright's rifle swung sharply, muzzling the half-crouched man.

"Don't try to make a break, Bob! Yuh're not fast enough to beat a thirty-forty slug!"

ACROSS the half-filled grave the Tumbling H men tensed. Violence peaked up swiftly, blaspheming the quiet of Jeff's burial. One reckless move from Bob and the men across the pit would join him. There would be more men to bury.

And suddenly Lennie was sick of violence and death. Her hand went out to her brother, feeling his muscles jump under her fingers.

"No, Bob!" she cried. "No! Give him your gun, and go peacefully!"

She saw him look at her, tense and half-rebellious. She saw his lips whiten and the yellow flecks deepen in his eyes. Then he pulled away from her and relief came to Lennie, leaving her weak-kneed and spent.

McVail walked slowly into the clearing, holding his Colt in his hand. He walked up to Bob, reached out and lifted the young man's weapon from his holster. Stepping back, he jerked his head.

"Come along. We'll saddle yuh a hoss at the ranch."

Sam came forward, facing McVail, shaking his head.

"Yuh know exactly what yuh're doin', Jim?"

The sheriff nodded. There was something between the two men, something unspoken, that was felt by the others. McVail's grey eyes held Sam's, as if challenging him, and finally Sam shrugged.

"Yuh're makin' a bad mistake," he said tonelessly. "Bob didn't kill Jeff."

"That will come out in the trial," McVail said dispassionately. He turned to Bob and motioned with his Colt down the path. "Let's go."

"Some day I'm goin' to kill yuh!" Bob said, and his voice shook with the intensity of his feeling. "If it's the last thing I do, McVail, I'm goin' to kill yuh!"

The sheriff stiffened, his face hard and bitter in the morning light. Sam wet his lips.

Then Bob moved past him, walking quickly down the path to the Tumbling H, and McVail walked behind him.

Albright remained standing on the rock, his rifle holding the men around Jeff's grave.

He waited until McVail's signaling shot told him the sheriff was waiting, then he stepped down, his voice level with warning.

"Take it easy for a few minutes before follerin' me. I've got a nervous trigger finger."

He backed down the path and disappeared around the bend. The sheriff was waiting for him by the Tumbling H corral. Bob, in saddle beside him, was sullen.

McVail watched Albright slide his rifle into scabbard and mount.

"Let's go," he said harshly, and didn't look at the tight-lipped young fellow between them until they hit the river trail and headed for Douglas.

CHAPTER XI

Out of the River

SLOWLY Lennie walked down the path to the ranchhouse. Sarah waddled along, trying to console her.

"No jury will convict Bob on such flimsy evidence, Lennie. We'll see Lawyer Taylor tomorrow. He may even get Bob out on bail."

Socrates Sam walked behind them, preoccupied and worried, followed by the group of silent Tumbling H riders. They split in the yard, the men heading for the bunkhouse.

Sam followed Lennie and his wife up the steps to the wide veranda where Jeff used to wait for him. The chair Jeff had built himself was tipped back against the wall, but it was empty, and that feeling went with Sam into the big living room.

Lennie sank down on the sofa. Sarah stood by, clasping her hands nervously, not saying anything.

Sam walked to the big stone fireplace and looked at the picture resting on the mantel. It was an old daguerreotype in a gilt frame.

It was a family group. A man in black broadcloth, ascetic-faced and black-mustached, sitting stiffly upright in a high-backed chair. At his left, one hand resting on the chair back, stood a sensitive-mouthed woman; on the other a boy and a girl, aged three and five.

Sam turned and looked at Lennie. "What did yore mother tell yuh about yore father?" he asked.

Lennie looked at him with surprise. "Very little," she said dully. "She never talked about him except to say he had been a good man and had been killed in an accident." Her eyes met his. "Why?"

Sam stood silent. "Nothin'," he finally answered, and turned away. "Come, Sarah."

"Come with us, Lennie," the portly woman said. "You can stay in town with us."

The girl shook her head. "I want to be alone for a while. I want to think."

"Thinking, at this moment, is bad for you," Sarah said. "And it won't change things."

Sam took his wife by the arm. "Come, Sarah." He looked down at Lennie, his eyes kind and understanding. "We'll be waitin' for you, later."

The girl shrugged. She walked to the door and watched Sam and his wife get into the gig and drive away. She stood there in the doorway until the buckboard became a speck on the river trail.

The sun was beginning to slant in from the west. Saddled horses, stamping impatiently in front of the bunkhouse, drew her attention.

Bill Tate, Tumbling H foreman, came out of the bunkhouse and paused to slide a rifle into his saddle holster.

"Bill!"

Lennie came down the steps and crossed the yard, her voice halting him as he was about to swing to saddle. Behind him the rest of the Tumbling H men appeared, hard-lipped and silent.

"Bill!" she repeated sharply. "Where are you going?"

"To town!" her foreman answered.

He was a small, wiry man, sunburned and leathery, and he walked with a limp. He had blue eyes in a seamed, harsh face and she could tell by the coldness in them that there was going to be trouble. Tate had always sided with Bob against Jeff when Bob had counseled action against the Ace of Spades.

"Going to town won't help Bob!" she appealed. "I need you here!"

"Doin' what?" Tate asked gruffly. "Mend harness?"

She caught at a straw. "The Texans will need help when they start driving the Triangle herd onto our range. There'll be more than enough work then."

Tate shook his head. "We're leavin', Lennie." He had taught her and Bob to ride and that familiarity was in him as he spoke. "The Tumblin' H is through. Al-

lison's got us licked!"

She didn't believe it. "Bill!" she said. "You're quitting!"

He avoided her eyes. The others spread out and began to mount. Tate looked at her.

"Yeah, we're quittin'," he said gruffly, and swung up into saddle.

She watched them ride out of the yard, then slowly walked back to the house. The only man left, Benson, old and badly crippled, stood in the door of the harness shop. The screen door slammed in the quiet and Benson cursed softly. . . .

THE sun had dropped when Larry Brennan limped into the Tumbling H ranchyard.

Tired and bruised as he was he could still appreciate the layout that had been Halliday's life work. There was a rambling stone-and-log ranchhouse shadowed by tall, evenly spaced poplars on the north and east. Across the yard was the bunkhouse and the harness and blacksmith shops, and behind them a corral and a small barn where saddle horses were kept.

Beyond this a pole fence enclosed a pasture that ran part way up the slope to the north. A score of milk cows grazed contentedly near the fence facing the ranch.

Brennan paused in the middle of the yard, sensing the unusual quiet, the air of desertion that seemed to linger here. The bunkhouse was unlighted, its door open to his gaze. Frowning, he started for the ranchhouse. Someone was at home here, for there was a light in the windows.

A man moved out of the shadows of the harness shop, his voice thin and querulous.

"Where yuh headed for, stranger?"

Larry Brennan swung around. Twilight lingered in the yard. The man with the shotgun shuffled slowly toward him. He was an old codger, stove up and unable to ride. His kind usually hung around a ranch, making themselves useful chopping kindling for the cook and doing odd jobs.

"I'm Brennan," Larry said. "'Trail boss from Texas."

Benson paused. His gaze took in the Texan's condition, hatless, empty-holstered and bruised, and slowly he lowered his shotgun.

"Looks like yuh need a change of clothes," he said gruffly.

"I had a bit of trouble crossin' the river," Brennan admitted drily.

"Come along," Benson said. "I'll get yuh some of Big Tim's clothes. They'll be a mite large but they're dry."

Brennan followed him into the bunkhouse. The absence of other Tumbling H riders puzzled him.

"Where's the rest of the crew?" he inquired casually.

Benson scraped a match and lighted an oil lamp on a table in the middle of the room. He turned and looked at Brennan, his seamed face emotionless.

"Left," he replied laconically.

Brennan sat down on a bunk and pulled off his boots. He watched Benson rummage around in a locker at the far end of the room, then come back with socks, pants, shirt and long underwear.

"Here yuh are," the old-timer said.

He sat down on the bunk facing Brennan and watched the big Texan peel to the skin and get into the clothes.

"Boys left couple hours ago," he broke the silence to say. "Right after McVail and Albright come and arrested Bob Masters."

Brennan stood up and tightened his belt around Tim's pants. They were a little roomy in the waist.

"Yuh mean they quit?"

Benson shrugged. "They made it look that way, to Miss Masters. But I'm figgerin' they headed for town—and trouble!"

Larry Brennan walked to the bunkhouse door, tightening his cartridge belt at his waist. Dusk was fast blurring outlines in the yard.

"Yuh say Miss Masters is at home?"

Benson came up beside him. "Yeah." He looked into the yard, and added softly, "She hasn't been out of the house since the boys left."

Brennan left the old man and crossed the yard. The shadows were thick against the house and the poplars stood up tall

and majestic, making a windbreak on the north. There were flower beds in front of the house, and the thought came to the Texan that this was what he would have liked—a place like this and a woman waiting for him.

He knocked on the door and waited. After a long silence Lennie's voice came without emotion:

"Come in."

Brennan opened the door and stepped inside the long living room. Lennie Masters was sitting at a table. A book was opened in front of her, but Brennan could tell by the blank expression on her face that she had not been reading.

She looked at him without interest.

"I'm glad to see you," she said.

"Thank yuh," Brennan said. He indicated his clothes. "I ran into a bit of trouble crossin' the river and one of yore men dug these up for me."

She sat there, beaten and alone, trying to keep the shreds of composure about her, but she wanted to cry. All the things that had made up her life were gone, or about to go.

BRENNAN stood in the half shadows by the door. He was big and solid and there was a quiet strength about him that drew her. All her life, after her mother died, she had been tied down with the responsibility of her brother, and now that responsibility weighed heavily upon her. Almost desperately now she wanted to put her trust in someone, lay her responsibility in stronger hands.

Larry Brennan felt her helplessness. He walked to her, faced her across the table. The shaded lamp left his face in semi-darkness.

"I heard what happened," he said softly. "Heard that McVail jailed yore brother, and that yore men left yuh."

She nodded. He stood silent, and after a while she said:

"I'm through fighting. All I want to do is get Bob out of jail. I'm going to sell what's left of the ranch."

"I never saw a better layout," he interrupted quietly. "It's worth fightin' for."

She smiled bitterly. "In two more days, without cows on the range, the ranch will be taken over by the bank and auctioned off. I have no real choice."

Brennan frowned. "I should have Barstow's answer tomorrow. It'll only take six or seven hours to get that Triangle herd on Tumblin' H grass."

"If Barstow says to go ahead," she reminded.

He was silent. She was right. He should have been more explicit when he wired the Triangle boss, should have explained the situation here. But he hadn't known it himself, and now it was too late. He couldn't promise her anything, and he knew it.

"Just what is the situation?" he asked. "Why did Jeff get himself caught in such a deal?"

Lennie shrugged. "Two years ago Jeff borrowed money from the bank to build a dam across Crazy Horse Creek on our lower range. Carson inserted a clause that authorized him to call in the loan if at any time Uncle Jeff failed to show cows on his range. Uncle was never keen on legal matters, and Mark Carson is a friend of ours. I understand Uncle Jeff was advised that it was there merely to reassure the bank's depositors, and Jeff could not foresee, of course, the trouble that followed."

Brennan nodded. "Then Allison's men started to make trouble," he said quietly.

"We could never prove they were Ace of Spades riders who ran off our cattle," she said. "There was talk of rustlers operating out of Grizzly Hollow. Before we woke up to what was happening most of our cattle were gone. We sold most of what was left to meet the loan, but it wasn't enough. Carson was nice enough to extend payment last year, but this year he warned Uncle Jeff he would have to call in the amount of the loan. Uncle asked him for more time and Carson gave him until the end of this month. That was when Uncle Jeff wrote to Barstow."

Again Brennan nodded. "It was a long drive," he said. "A thousand miles. We got here as fast as we could."

"I don't blame you," the girl said. "It's not your fight."

"No," he admitted. "We didn't come lookin' for trouble. But I got into it the night I rode into Douglas."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the letter he had taken from Bates. It was wet and the ink had smeared, but it was still legible.

"A swamper named Bates had this on him when he came up to my room in the El Dorado," he said. "He took me for Jeff and died without knowin' he was talkin' to the wrong man. This is what he wanted to give yore uncle."

He handed her the letter.

CHAPTER XII

The Third Man to Die

HESITANTLY Lennie took the letter and read it, then she looked up at Larry Brennan, puzzled and a little troubled.

"The Kansas Pacific? What does it mean?

"Power!" Brennan said bluntly. "Money—which is the same thing. Whoever owns land over which the railroad will build will make a fortune."

She looked at the address again. "Mark Carson. How did Bates get hold of this letter?"

"Probably got it out of Allison's desk," Brennan said. "He worked in the Casino and mebbe he was nosy. He might have gone through Allison's desk one night and seen the letter. He mebbe got the idea yore uncle might like to know that the Kansas-Pacific was comin' through Timberlake Valley and be willin' to pay for it."

Color was coming back into Lennie's face. "But it's addressed to Mark Carson," she said. "How could Allison have got possession of it?"

"I don't know," Brennan said.

He turned as a Chinese cook shuffled into the room and announced:

"Supper ready, Missee Lennie."

The girl hesitated. Then she turned and said:

"Will you join me—Larry?"

They ate in silence, and took their coffee back to the living room. The girl was moody and depressed. Brennan rolled a cigarette with the papers and tobacco he found in a jar on the mantel. The picture caught his eye. He looked at it closely, then turned as Lennie crossed the room to him.

"The family picture," she said. "That was taken in Memphis just before Father died. We came to the Tumbling H shortly after."

The mantel clock bonged softly, its eight strokes fading into the stillness.

Larry Brennan turned away. "I better be gettin' on," he said. "Mebbe Barstow's wire has come in. I'd like to borrow a hoss and—" his hand brushed down past

[*Turn page*]

"Charles Rodney's Been Dead Almost a Year—and You Must Be the One Who Killed Him!"

THAT WAS the accusation which faced Rafe Caradec when he came to Painted Rock to tell Charles Rodney's daughter that her father was dead.

"You come—from my father," said the girl tremulously. "Why, I—"

Bruce Barkow, who had followed Rafe and the girl, stopped before them then, his eyes red with anger. "What do yuh mean, comin' here with such a story? Charles Rodney was killed a long time ago—we found him on the trail, shot. I brought back his belongings to Miss Rodney."

"Miss Rodney," Rafe said softly, "somehow you've got hold of some wrong information. Your father died not more than two months ago. He sent me with a message for you."

But the girl wouldn't listen, and Rafe found himself in a mighty tough spot as he fought to clear up the mystery in THE TRAIL TO CRAZY MAN, the smashing novel by Jim Mayo featured next issue! It's a quick-trigger saga of the West that will hold you breathless from start to finish!

his empty holster and he frowned—"I could use a gun. Mebbe I could use yore uncle's till I get another one to replace the one I lost."

"You expecting trouble?"

He shrugged. "I like to be ready to meet it."

"Uncle Jeff quit wearing a gun five years ago," Lennie said. "He was getting on in years and said it only invited trouble."

"The invitations have already been sent out," Brennan said drily. "I got formal notice a few hours ago, when one of Allison's men took a couple of shots at me across the river. It wasn't his fault he didn't make the invitation a funeral notice."

She frowned at his grim levity, not understanding how he could joke at this trouble.

"I'll get Uncle Jeff's gun for you," she said.

He finished his cigarette while waiting, occasionally glancing at the framed picture and the man who had not lived to see his children grow up.

Lennie Masters came back with a long-barreled Dragoon model Colt .45. Brennan felt the heft of it, finding its balance as it lay in his hand. He let it slide into his holster, drew it in a quick, smooth motion, and was satisfied.

"I'll get Benson to cut a horse out for you," Lennie said.

They went outside and crossed the yard to the bunkhouse. The oldster was sitting on a bench in front of the shack, smoking a pipe.

"Mr. Brennan's going to town," Lennie said. "Give him his pick of what's in the corral. He can use Uncle Jeff's saddle. And—" she made a sudden decision—"saddle Prince for me. I've decided to go to town myself tonight." She turned to Brennan. "I'll get dressed," she said, and went back into the house.

Benson rose. "'Saddles are in the harness shop," he said briefly.

Brennan followed the limping oldster, conscious of the stiffness of his own leg, of the lesser bruises he had suffered in the river. Benson lighted a lantern and indicated a saddle. The Texan gathered up blanket and extra gear, then reached out and said, "Here, I'll take it," as Benson labored with another saddle.

Benson nodded his appreciation and they went to the corral. A half moon was pushing up over the hills across the river. Brennan set the saddles on the top pole of the corral, draped extra gear across them, and followed Benson inside.

THE crippled oldster had taken a riata from one of the saddles and was shaking out a loop. He nodded to the small bunch of horses crowding the far end of the enclosure.

"Prince's the palomino," he said. "The small one next to the gray."

"I'll take the black," Brennan said. "The one with the spot of white on its nose."

Benson glanced up at him. "That's Ebony. Best cayuse in the remuda. But he's stubborn and he'll fight yuh every time."

"I like a fighter," Brennan said.

The palomino gave Benson little trouble, but Ebony proved corral-wise and hard to rope. The old-timer looked admiringly at Brennan when the Texan led the black back to the gate.

"Outside of Bob there ain't a man on the ranch who can get that close to Ebony," he said.

Brennan saddled and swung aboard. The black uncorked itself for a workout that didn't last long. He was pretty docile by the time Lennie Masters came down the ranchhouse steps.

"I'll be staying with the Luces," she told Benson. "Take care of things until I get back."

She and Larry Brennan left the ranch and took the river road to Douglas. The moon painted the hills with a silver light and the river wound like a ribbon in the night.

They didn't have much to say, and it was late when they entered Douglas. They stabled the horses at the Timberlake stalls, and Brennan walked with Lennie to the

Luce cottage.

He said good night at the gate and watched her walk to the door and knock. After a long wait someone came to the door. It was dark and Brennan could not tell if it was Sam or his wife, but Lennie disappeared inside. Brennan turned and walked to the El Dorado.

Velie, the night clerk, was dozing when the Texan entered. He woke with a start when Brennan reached across the desk and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Oh!" he said sourly. "It's you."

"Was yuh expectin' somebody else?" Brennan asked.

The clerk shrugged. "I thought you left for good."

"You and the day clerk ought to get together sometime," Brennan interrupted. "Did a wire come in for me?"

The clerk turned and looked into a pigeon-hole. "Nope," he said irritably. "Not a thing."

Brennan felt like reaching out and shaking the sour-faced clerk until his teeth rattled, but he restrained himself.

"The room still vacant?" he asked brusquely.

The clerk nodded. "Far as I know." He turned and looked into a cigar box. "Thought I had the key in here," he said, frowning.

"Never mind," Larry said, turning away. "I left the door unlocked."

He walked through the deserted lobby and went upstairs. He was halfway down the narrow hall when he noticed that the door to his room was ajar. Light from inside made a yellow bar on the warped board flooring.

He quickened his pace and was frowning as he pushed the door open. A man was going through his warbag. He was bending over the bed, the warbag's contents strewn about, and when he heard Brennan enter he swung around, annoyance creasing his swarthy face. The annoyance faded into shocked surprise.

He took a quick step away from the bed, and a name jumped to his bearded lips.

"Brennan!"

He drew his gun in the same instant. Halliday's Dragoon leaped into Brennan's fist. The other man's gun was just clearing leather when the Texan's slug hit him in the chest. He fell backward against the bed. His Colt went off, sending a slug into the wall. He turned convulsively and slid off the bed and lay sprawled on the floor.

Brennan walked to him. The broken spur on the swarthy man's boot caught his eye. He had seen that boot and that spur at close quarters two nights before, while bending over Bates' body.

Holstering his Colt, Brennan sat down on the bed. This room, he thought wryly, was jinxed.

This was the third man to die in it since he had come to Douglas!

The night clerk appeared in the doorway. He looked at the body by the bed, then at Brennan and, mumbling something unintelligible, he beat a hasty retreat.

BRENNAN felt in his shirt pocket for tobacco before remembering he was out. The tie strings of a Bull Durham sack dangled from the dead man's pocket and he leaned over and confiscated it. He was halfway through his cigarette when boots clumped heavily up the stairs and came toward his room.

McVail came into the room, glowering. Albright shuffled in behind him. The deputy flicked a glance at the Texan, dropped his gaze to the body, and raised an eyebrow.

He eased back against the wall by the open door and let the sheriff take over.

Velie hovered in the hallway, flanked by several sleepy-eyed spectators.

The sheriff drew his glance briefly over the body, then shifted his attention to the Texan.

"That's the Texas trail boss—Brennan," Albright filled in drawlingly. "This is his room. Same one Jeff and Bates died in."

"Must be contagious," McVail said. His eyes searched Brennan's hard face. "What was Saber doin' up here?"

"Takin' over," the Texan replied levelly. "I found him goin' through my belongin's like he owned 'em. When I walked in he went for his gun."

Saber was sprawled at the foot of the bed, his pistol still clenched in his fist. The Texan's roll was spread out on the bed. McVail walked to the dead man and pried the gun from clenched fingers. He sniffed at the muzzle, swung the chamber out and frowned at the fired cartridge.

"Saber considered himself a bad man," the sheriff said musingly. He looked at Brennan, lips quirking. "So you're Brennan?"

Larry looked at Albright, sensing trouble here.

"Yeah, I'm Brennan."

"Heaved Nick Trellis through a window, and killed him later in the Casino," the sheriff said, still in that low, musing tone. "Now it's Saber."

He spun the chamber of Saber's Colt, clicked it back in place, and thumbed back the spiked hammer. He turned and flipped the muzzle up, lining it abruptly on the Texan.

"Yuh're too handy with a gun, Brennan!" he said coldly. "We'll have to keep yuh bottled up for a spell!"

The move caught Brennan by surprise. He had killed Saber in self-defense—the thing was plain even to a ten-year-old. He tensed, his voice going sour.

"Was this polecat a friend of yores, McVail?"

The sheriff didn't answer. Albright stepped away from the wall.

"Shuck that gun-belt, Brennan," he said softly.

Brennan got up slowly, knowing he could not beat the gun in the sheriff's hand, knowing he would have to give in, but hating it.

"All right," he said harshly. "You hold the ace cards."

He unbuckled his belt and let it fall at his feet.

"Step away from it!" McVail ordered. He waited until Brennan obeyed, then nodded to his deputy. "Take his belt, Al." He stepped back and motioned toward the door. "You go first," he said to Brennan. "And don't try to make a break for it. It won't get yuh anywhere but a box at Socrates Sam's!"

CHAPTER XIII

Whose Law?

A SMALL group crowding the doorway gave way as the lawmen went out with their prisoner. Brennan walked down the stairs and out through the lobby. On the walk outside McVail and Albright flanked him. The sheriff kept Saber's gun in his hand, held flat against his thigh.

"This way, Brennan!"

They crossed the street, went north two blocks, and stopped before a one-story building with an iron-barred window. Albright rapped on the door and after a while the bolt slid back and a keen-faced man with buek teeth opened the door. He had a double-barreled shotgun in his hands.

"Thanks, Kenny," McVail said, and the man nodded as he stepped back and replaced the gun in the wall rack.

"Any time, Jim—any time yuh need help," he said quickly. He looked at Brennan. "This the feller who did the shootin'?"

McVail nodded and walked to the desk and tossed Saber's gun on it. Albright heeled the door shut.

"Saber finally got what he's been lookin' for, Kenny," Albright said. "Another customer for Socrates Sam."

"Saber!" Kenny said sharply. "The Ace of Spades gunslinger?"

McVail nodded again as he came back. Kenny turned to look at Brennan with new interest.

"Get some sleep, Kenny," Albright said. "I'm stayin' in tonight."

McVail opened a door to left of his desk and motioned Brennan down a short corridor that ended at a blank wall. Facing the corridor were several iron-barred cells.

He unlocked a cell door and waited. Brennan walked grimly past him into a

bare room with a small, barred window high up in the back wall. An army cot was set up under it. McVail locked the door.

"Pleasant dreams, Brennan," Albright said.

Larry watched them walk away. He heard McVail say to the horsefaced deputy, "I'll see yuh first thing in the mornin'. I don't expect trouble from the Tumblin' H tonight, but if anything happens don't try to buck it alone. You know where to find me."

The door closed on the office and darkness blotted out the corridor. Moonlight wedged in through the small window, curling about the barred cell partition with ghostly fingers.

The cot in the next cell creaked as someone moved on it.

"Who'd yuh throw through a window this time, Brennan?" Bob Masters' voice came, bitterly amused.

Larry Brennan walked to the bars separating him from the next cell. His eyes were adjusting to the darkness. He saw the wiry young Bob sitting on his cot, smoking a cigarette. Bob got up and walked to the bars, looking in at Brennan. His cigarette flared as he dragged in smoke, lighting up his wild, stubbled face with its red light.

"I just killed a polecat named Saber," Brennan said. "Found him goin' through my warbag when I got back to the El Dorado."

Masters stiffened. "Saber!"

Brennan reached into his pocket for the makings. "Yeah. Friend of yours?"

"No one who works for the Ace of Spades is a friend of mine," Bob sneered.

He turned and started pacing, like an impatient cat. He prowled around his cell and came back to where Brennan was waiting.

"Yuh say McVail jailed yuh for killin' Saber in self-defense?" He was close up against the bars and the moonlight brushed his lean, taut face. "I've known all along McVail was in with Allison. This proves it!" His hands clenched around the bars and his voice was as soft as tearing silk.

"I've hated McVail since he stopped me from gunnin' Allison a year ago, right after Allison's gunnies made their big raid on Tumblin' H stock. Jeff and my sister backed him up. The law, they said—McVail's the law!" The young fellow's lips curled against his teeth. "Whose law, Brennan—whose law?"

The Texan was silent, understanding the young man's bitter hate.

"I don't know," he said then.

"I'll tell yuh!" Bob Masters grated. "Allison's law!" He relaxed his grip on the bars and the intensity faded from his face. "But I've got a joker hidden up my sleeve, too," he said, softly again. "I'm gettin' out of here, Brennan. Soon. An' when I do I'm goin' to kill McVail!"

Larry Brennan shook his head. "Killin' McVail won't stop Allison. It won't stop you and yore sister from losin' the Tumblin' H."

BOB walked around the cot and came back.

"What yuh goin' to do with that herd?" he growled. "Those cows are the only thing that can save us. What yuh goin' to do with 'em?"

"Turn 'em over to the Tumblin' H—soon as I get Barstow's say-so," Brennan said. Then, remembering Lennie's decision to sell, he added, "Yore sister's in town, stayin' with the Luces. She'll probably be around to see yuh in the mornin'. She's goin' to sell the Tumblin' H. That's a mistake. Tell her to hold on a little longer."

Young Masters paused in his pacing. He came to the barred partition and looked at Brennan, as if making up his mind about the big Texan.

"I just ran out of tobacco, Brennan," he finally said. "How about the makin's?"

Brennan smiled as he handed his Bull Durham sack through the bars. . . .

McVail entered the office and found Albright shaving. The deputy turned.

"Yuh're early, Jim," he said. "Didn't expect yuh till after breakfast."

"Had breakfast," McVail said. He walked to the desk and threw his hat on it. "Quiet last night, Al?"

"As the inside of a church." Albright finished shaving, rinsed his face and wiped it dry. "Tate's an old-timer, Jim," he said, turning to the cot where he had discarded his gun-belt. "Used to ride up the trail and shoot up Abilene when he was younger. But I reckon he's cooled off a bit."

McVail settled himself in his chair. "Those Tumblin' H boys didn't come to town for nothin', Al. They're lookin' for trouble. Long as they're in town we'll have to keep on our toes. I don't want 'em breaking young Masters out of here."

"They won't!" growled Albright. He buckled his belt about his lean waist and shifted the holster against his leg. "I'm goin' out for some ham and eggs, Jim."

McVail nodded. "We'll talk to Brennan when yuh get back."

Ten minutes after the deputy had left, Vanity Carson knocked timidly on the door. He opened it and stepped aside to let her in.

"I'd like to see Bob," she said quickly. "I'm leaving tomorrow for St. Louis, and I would like to see Bob before I go."

There were dark circles under her eyes, as if she had slept badly, and McVail felt sorry for her.

"Does yore father know yuh've been comin' to see him?"

"No." Her dark eyes glanced up at him, pleading for understanding. "May I see him?"

McVail walked to the desk and took a bunch of keys from a nail. "Shore," he said.

He opened the door and let her precede him into the corridor. Larry Brennan was sitting on a cot. He got up and walked to the bars.

"How long yuh goin' to keep me here, Sheriff?"

McVail ignored him and opened the door to Bob's cell. The young fellow was tensed on his cot, eyeing the sheriff. Vanity turned, a tremulous smile conveying her gratitude to the scarred lawman.

McVail let her in. Then he locked the door behind her and walked back to his office. He filled his pipe and leaned back in his chair, letting his decision take shape in him. By the time he got up and let Vanity Carson out, he knew what he was going to do.

Albright came in a few minutes later, chewing on a cigar stub.

"Allison just rode in," he said, throwing his hat on his cot. "He had those two Laredo gunslingers with him—Crawford and Gans!"

McVail nodded. "Get that Texan in here, Al. I want to talk to him."

Albright walked down the corridor to Brennan's cell and unlocked the door. "McVail wants to see you, Brennan."

Larry got to his feet. "Nice of McVail," he said grimly. He was burning with a slow anger as he followed the deputy to the office.

McVail looked up as Brennan came in. He had the Texan's gun-belt and holstered Colt on the desk in front of him. He picked it up and handed it to Brennan who took it and buckled it about his waist.

"Glad yuh thought it over," he said coldly. "I was beginnin' to lose all respect for the law in Douglas."

McVail shrugged. "Long as yuh have some left," he observed, "it'll make me happy."

"Am I free to go?"

McVail nodded. "After yuh answer a few questions."

Brennan rubbed his chin stubble. "I'm hungry and I need a shave. Make it short, Sheriff!"

Albright scowled. "Yuh're too cussed cocky for yore own good."

McVAIL waved his deputy to silence. "Yuh've been in trouble since you came to Douglas," he said. "Yuh'll have to learn no man is bigger than the law here. You stay out of trouble from now on or I'll see that yuh take up permanent quarters in that cell yuh just left. Get that straight, Brennan!"

The Texan's lips curled. "Just to keep the record straight!" he snapped angrily, "I didn't come lookin' for trouble. I had a herd to deliver to Halliday—"

"And yuh found out Halliday was dead!" McVail cut in sharply. "What did Bates

want that night?"

"What yuh gettin' at?"

McVail came to his feet. "Bates had somethin' he was goin' to turn over to Jeff. Somethin' important enough to have a man foller him to the El Dorado for it. What was it, Brennan?"

"That's what Saber must have been lookin' for last night," Albright added. "Did he find it?"

"No," Brennan said. "Saber didn't find it." He reached into his pocket and tossed the Kansas-Pacific letter on McVail's desk. "That's what Bates wanted to give to Halliday."

McVail picked it up and read it, his scarred face showing no emotion. Then he folded it and put it in his pocket.

"Yuh through?" Brennan asked.

McVail nodded. "Just keep out of trouble while yuh're in town," he said shortly.

Brennan took a hitch at his belt. "I'm not guaranteein' anythin'," he said flatly. "I'm beginnin' to feel that young feller yuh locked up back there is right. 'Whose law?' he said. 'Allison's law!' No, McVail, I'm not guaranteein' anythin'. I got a herd south of here—cows we trailed a thousand miles for Jeff. If anythin' happens to them cows while I'm in town, I'm not goin' to wait for the Law."

He turned as the door opened. Lennie Masters came into the office. Socrates Sam was right behind her.

"Larry!" Lennie said with quick surprise. "I heard you had been jailed!"

The Texan nodded. "The sheriff just decided it was a mistake."

Lennie looked past him to McVail. "How much is Allison paying you, Sheriff?" she asked contemptuously.

McVail flushed. "No more than you are, Miss Masters."

Sam, moving in behind her, said quickly: "We came to see Bob."

It was intended to change the subject, to get the girl's anger dissipated. But Lennie's eyes were blazing, as if long withheld emotions had finally come to the surface in her.

"I hope you're satisfied, McVail!" she burst out defiantly. "Someone murdered Uncle Halliday, and you cover up your inefficiency and bungling by arresting my brother. It's in keeping with your entire policy, isn't it? All the time Jeff was coming to you for help you put him off with promises and excuses. He believed you were backing him, even when we lost the last of our stock. He listened to you when you advised him not to bring in men who could oppose Allison's hired killers! You said that would mean range war, and you weren't going to let that happen here. Well, you've had your way, McVail! My uncle's dead and my brother is in your jail, charged with his murder. If that's what you wanted, you should be a proud man today. But I'll always remember you as a small man, hiding his incompetency and his thievery behind a lawman's badge!"

CHAPTER XIV

"The Cows Are Gone!"

IT WAS a long speech—a contemptuously bitter denunciation on the part of Lennie Masters. McVail took it in silence, his disfigured features showing no emotion.

"I'm sorry that's the way yuh see it, Miss Masters," he said mildly.

He turned away from her and walked to the window. His shoulders were square against the sunlight coming in.

"See that Sam and Miss Masters get to see Bob, Al," he said, without looking back.

Albright nodded grimly. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but held himself in check and chewed savagely on his cigar.

"This way!" he snapped.

Anger still burned in Lennie's face. She hesitated in the doorway and looked back at Brennan.

"When shall I see you again, Larry?"

"Soon as I check on that wire from Barstow," Brennan said. "It should be in this mornin'."

She nodded and followed Albright down the corridor. Sam shuffled to the door, then looked back at the sheriff.

"She was mad, Jim," he said, speaking to the sheriff's back. His tone held a note of apology. "She didn't mean what she said."

McVail did not turn. Sam looked at him a moment longer, then shrugged and walked down the corridor to Bob's cell.

Brennan watched the sheriff. There was something in McVail's attitude that spoke of a hurt that reached deep, of a scar more disfiguring than the one on his face.

Shrugging, the Texan turned away. . . .

The day clerk at the El Dorado gulped when he saw Larry Brennan approach. The Texan propped his elbow on the counter and jabbed a finger at the man.

"If I find a body in that room this mornin', I'll sue the hotel for operatin' under false pretenses!"

The clerk grinned weakly. "Has been a lot of trouble, hasn't there?"

"That wire come for me?"

The clerk shook his head, and Brennan scowled. He crossed the lobby and went upstairs to his room. Saber's body had been removed, the blood stains washed away, but Brennan's roll lay spread out on the bed as the marauder had left it.

Brennan opened the window and looked down on the back stairs. The sun slanted into the yard and a breeze fluttered the faded curtains against his face.

If Bob Masters hadn't killed Jeff Halliday, he wondered, then who had? One of Allison's gunnies could have. The killer could have come up these back stairs, waited until Bob left, then come in through the hall window and into Jeff's room. But Jeff would have put up some kind of a fight, would have yelled or made enough noise to attract attention. Besides, it was hardly likely that he would have let anyone in he didn't know.

Brennan sat down on the bed, thinking of the night he had slept here. Then he got up and began to pace. What was holding up Barstow's answer?

He stopped in front of the dresser mirror and looked at himself. His hair was disheveled and his hard face had a three-day whisker crop. He winced, remembering that Lennie Masters had seen him this way.

"What in thunder?" he asked himself suddenly. "What does it matter if that girl did see me like this? What does she mean to me?"

He sat down again to figure it out.

"All right," he said to himself, "so yuh've come a thousand miles to stick yore neck into trouble. Yuh don't have to stay. In another hour or two yuh should get that wire. No matter what the old man's answer is yuh can be on yore way back to Texas in another day. Are yuh goin' to stay because of that girl?"

He got up and walked to the wash basin on the stand by the dresser. He washed and changed into clean clothes. He combed his hair, then went down and had a late breakfast in the hotel dining room. He had promised Lennie he would see her as soon as he got word from Barstow, but he wanted to look right when he did.

He turned in for a shave at Tony's, bought himself a new hat in a store on the same block, and turned in for a drink in the Preston House.

A group of men in range clothes took up one end of the long bar. Brennan wondered if they were the Tumbling H riders who had come to town. He would have joined them, but they looked clannish, and he had nothing to say to them anyway. Not until he got that wire.

HE HAD his drink and walked out. He crossed the street and made his way to the telegraph office. There was a man at the key. Brennan waited, listening to the staccato message going out over the wire.

"I'm Brennan," Larry said when the man finished. "Expectin' a wire from Texas."

The operator tilted his green eyeshade and looked up at him.

"Jerry just went out to the El Dorado

with it. Came in five minutes ago."

"Thanks," Brennan said, and walked out.

He was passing Sam's place when Lennie said:

"I wouldn't have recognized you, if it wasn't for your walk, Mr. Brennan. You always look as though you were going some place in a hurry." She smiled. "Is it that important?"

He took off his hat, conscious of its newness. "Nothin' will ever be that important," he said gravely.

She was standing in Sam's doorway, and there was a question in her eyes as they met his, as if she were wondering what lay behind his answer. Then she looked away and sought refuge in a change of subject.

"Have you received your wire?"

"It was 'Larry' in the sheriff's office," he said, keeping his eyes on her. "People who don't like me call me Brennan, and the 'Mr.' is plumb superfluous."

"All right then," she said, laughing. "Have you received that wire—Larry?"

He smiled. "It should be waitin' for me at the hotel."

"I'll come with you," she said quickly. She turned and called back to Sam inside. "Sam, tell Sarah I'll be late for dinner."

She turned, hooking her arm in Brennan's.

"There's still time, if Barstow's answer is favorable."

She paused, feeling the Texan stiffen. Brennan was staring up the street where a sagging rider was coming into town at a run.

"Duke!" Brennan burst out harshly. "It's Duke!"

He left Lennie and began to run toward the winded animal. Duke was heading for the El Dorado. Brennan reached him as the Triangle puncher pulled the sorrel to halt by the hotel rail.

Duke folded over the horn, fighting his weakness. His shoulder had been roughly bandaged, but blood made a wide, ragged circle in the bindings. Brennan eased the puncher out of saddle.

"What happened?"

The answer was in Duke's contorted face before he spoke.

"Raided! Beefy, Carp and Red are dead! Johnny's missing! The others are shot up!" His face tightened. "And, Larry—the cows are gone!"

Larry Brennan carried the slim puncher into the El Dorado and set him down in one of the stuffed chairs by the potted palms. Lennie pushed through the crowd that circled them and touched Brennan's arm.

"Who is he?"

"One of the men I left with the herd."

"They hit us from behind!" Duke interrupted harshly. "They were already in the canyon when they hit us, Larry. Don't ask me how they got by Beefy. But they did! Caught the rest of us asleep."

"Take it easy," Brennan said. "I'll get yuh a doc."

"I'll go," Lennie said quickly. "I'll get Doctor Stillwell. His office is a little way down the block." She turned and pushed through the crowd.

Brennan singled out a pop-eyed individual staring at Duke.

"You! Get a shot of whisky from the bar!"

The man shuffled off and Brennan turned back to the Triangle puncher. Someone called, "Brennan!" and the Texan looked around impatiently. The day clerk came up to him and handed him the telegram.

"Came for you a few minutes ago," he said. He looked down at Duke with curious eyes.

Brennan glanced at Barstow's reply. It read:

SORRY ABOUT JEFF. USE YOUR OWN JUDGMENT CONCERNING THE COWS. WIRE ME LATER.

Brennan crumpled the message in his fist. Barstow's message had come too late!

The pop-eyed man came back with the glass of whisky. The shot seemed to revive Duke. He sat up and pushed hair out of his eyes.

"I left Chuck and Jim in camp," he said

thickly. "They were too shot up to ride. Hank's got a creased head and a broken arm. He's taking care of them until we get a doctor out there."

Brennan felt a tightening in his face. Allison had made good his threat, but if he thought Brennan had been bluffing about a come-back he was soon to find out different.

"What happened to Johnny?" he asked.

Duke shook his head. "Chuck saw him prowling around just before they hit us. Chuck had just come off the cliff watch, after being relieved by Beefy. The kid told Chuck he was going to the spring for water."

He stopped as Lennie and the doctor loomed up.

DR. STILLWELL was a small, busy man with kind eyes and a bushy gray beard. He took charge without a word.

"Not too bad," he said, after exposing the wound. "Bullet ripped through shoulder muscles and chipped a piece of bone. Lost some blood, didn't you, fellow?"

Duke nodded. He winced as the doctor swabbed the ugly bullet-hole with a strong antiseptic. The medico bandaged the wound with swift efficiency.

"That'll do it," he said briskly, snapping his bag shut. "You'll be as good as new in a couple of weeks. However, you'd better take it easy for a few days."

Duke sat up. "Take it easy!" he shouted angrily. He saw Lennie looking at him and flushed apologetically. "I'm sorry, Miss Masters. I—I assume you are Lennie Masters?"

She nodded. "I've heard men get mad before," she said, smiling faintly. "Sometimes it's a help."

"I wish it were," Duke said bitterly. "But it won't change things now. It won't bring back Carp, Burns and Red. It won't bring back the herd we trailed up here for you."

"It's all right," Lennie said. She said it as though it didn't matter. She had given up hope of saving the Tumbling H the day her brother was arrested.

"No!" snapped Brennan. He took her by the shoulders. "It's not all right. We're goin' to fight! Understand? Fight! We're not givin' up now. I'm not takin' this raid sittin' down, waitin' for the Law to move, the way Jeff did. I know who's behind it! Mebbe I won't have the kind of proof the Law wants, but the devil with McVail and his brand of law anyhow! We'll settle this the way Halliday should have done long ago—the only way men like Allison can understand!"

"How?" the girl asked. "How, Larry? There's only you, and Duke."

"There's yore men!" he snapped. "I heard they were in town, itchin' for a fight!"

"They quit yesterday," she reminded him.

"Good men don't quit!" Brennan said. "There must have been a reason for their walkin' out on yuh. Where do they usually hang out when they're in town?"

Hope came into Lennie. "The Preston House."

"Who's yore foreman?"

"Bill Tate. He's been with the ranch almost as long as Uncle Jeff."

Duke got to his feet. "Wait for me! I'm coming with you!"

Bill Tate was heading for the bar when Brennan, Lennie and Duke came in. He saw them in the bar mirror and turned around, waiting for them to come to him.

"Mornin', Lennie," he said. His eyes met Brennan's. "This the Triangle trail boss?"

"Yes," Lennie said. "Larry, this is my foreman, Bill Tate."

"Duke," Brennan said, nodding to the tight-lipped puncher at his side.

"Howdy," Tate replied. "Yuh lookin' for me?"

"Where can we talk?" Brennan asked.

Tate waved an arm toward a table where the rest of the Tumbling H men were playing poker. Brennan and the others followed him to the table and the old foreman pulled a chair from a corner and offered it to Lennie. He remained standing.

"What's on yore mind, Brennan?"

CHAPTER XV

The Tumbling H Riders

CALCULATINGLY Brennan looked at the men seated around the poker table. They were leaning back, not looking at Lennie. They had evidently decided on a course of action between them and would not be easily persuaded to follow him. But getting back that Triangle herd, or as much of it as was possible, came first. Those cows could save the Tumbling H!

"Reckon yuh all know I came up the trail with cows for Halliday," he said bluntly. "When I got here Jeff was dead."

Tate's voice was dry. "That why yuh held up delivery?"

"I had my orders," Brennan answered. "Deliver to Halliday. What would you have done, Tate?"

The Tumbling H foreman shrugged.

"It's still not too late," Lennie said. "If you'll help."

Tate frowned. "Help?"

"The Triangle herd was raided last night," Brennan said. "Three of my men were killed. The others are shot up. Duke here just rode in with the news."

Tate scowled. "What yuh want us to do? Waste time tryin' to round 'em up for yuh?"

"Not for me!" Brennan snapped. "For the Tumblin' H!"

Tate glanced at his riders. He had his own plans, and he didn't want to put them off.

"No," he said.

Duke looked at Brennan. "Come on, Larry," he said thickly. "Let's get out of here."

Lennie Masters got up and stood beside the big Texan. Her voice was without censure.

"I told you they had quit, Larry. They no longer ride for the Tumbling H."

A puncher named "Lefty" threw his cards on the table.

"Wait a minute," he growled. "Where did yuh say yuh was holdin' them cows?"

"In Lost Springs Canyon, where Halliday told us to."

Lefty looked at his companions, then up to his scowling foreman.

"I'm for ridin' with Brennan," he said. "This other play we had in mind can wait. I've got a hunch we'll find out how our cows disappeared, too."

Another puncher, "Big Tim," got to his feet. "I'm with Lefty," he said.

Nichols shrugged. "Count me in."

"All right," Tate muttered reluctantly. "We're ridin'. We'll meet yuh in front of the El Dorado in ten minutes. . . ."

McVail looked up as Kenny came into the office. He had sent Albright for the bucktoothed man who was not a regular deputy, ran into the Douglas end of the Simmons Freight Company. Kenny was capable, honest, and not easily bluffed. And he didn't mind doing a little work for the Law.

"Sorry to have to call yuh in again," McVail said, smiling. The scar twisted his face into a grim leer, but his eyes backed the smile with little crinkles. "Some day the county commissioners will authorize another deputy. But until they do I'll have to call on you for help."

"It's all right," Kenny said heartily. "Glad to do it."

McVail put on his hat. He took some papers out of his desk drawer and thrust them into his coat pocket. He took a hitch at his double gun-belts, slid his right hand down over the slick butt.

"Albright and I have a couple of calls to make," he said. "I don't want to leave the office unguarded, not while we have Bob Masters in there. There's too much talk of a lynchin' goin' around—and there's a half dozen Tumblin' H men in town waitin' for a chance to break him out."

Kenny shrugged. "I heard talk about the lynchin'. But we won't have trouble with the Tumblin' H. I saw 'em ride past my office, headin' out of town, just before

Al showed up. That big Texan yuh had in here last night—Brennan—he was with them. There was Doc Stillwell and the Masters girl, too, and a stranger with an arm in a sling."

McVail looked puzzled.

"Somethin's up, Jim," Albright said. "I better look into it."

The sheriff shook his head. "We'll do that later. There's somethin' else I have to do first."

They went to the Casino. The gambling hall was deserted at this morning hour. Two men idled at the bar, another was playing solitaire at a table under the balcony. Barney, the bartender, stopped wiping glasses and came over when McVail crooked a finger at him.

"Where's Allison?"

"Upstairs," Barney said.

He watched the sheriff and Albright swing away from the bar without further conversation. Then he shifted his glance to the man playing solitaire. The gunman had stopped playing.

ALBRIGHT knew the door to Allison's office. He shoved it open and followed McVail inside, kicking the door shut behind him and lining up beside it, his back against the wall, his hand on the heel of his Colt.

Allison was behind his desk, a heavy mahogany affair that went with the plushy furniture, the wine-colored drapes, the deep piled rug. Gans, one of the imported Laredo gunmen, was standing up, a cigarette between thin lips. He had been talking with Allison. But he stopped when the Law entered, turning his head to look at them.

Allison crooked his lips about a fat cigar.

"Mornin', McVail," he said pleasantly. He deliberately ignored Albright. "What brings you around so early in the day?"

McVail looked Gans over with cold disrespect before bringing his gaze around to Allison.

"I've come to give yuh notice," he answered. His voice had a level quality, and a finality as definite as falling granite.

Allison straightened up. "Notice?"

"Yuh're packin' up and leavin' Douglas," McVail said bluntly. "I'm givin' yuh until tomorrow night to settle yore affairs and leave Timberlake Valley!"

Allison looked at McVail, surprise slackening his lips. Then he leaned back in his chair and laughed.

"You're crazy!" he stated flatly.

McVail smiled. He looked at Gans. The gunman was sneering.

"Yuh're leavin' tomorrow night, before sundown," the sheriff repeated coldly. "And that goes for yore hired gunslingers, Charley. Or I'll fill my jail with the lot of yuh!"

Allison crushed out his cigar on the tray in front of him and came to his feet.

"You're running a poor bluff, McVail!" he snapped. "I don't know what's behind this, but even the Law can't go around ordering honest citizens out of town."

"Since when," McVail snapped, "have you been honest?"

Allison's lips tightened. "What are you driving at?"

"There's a longer and a more legal way of doin' it," the sheriff said. "I could get the original owners of the Ace of Spades down here and have 'em testify how they were forced to sell yuh the ranch at gunpoint—and at yore price! I could, if I have to, show the court proof that yore men rustled Tumblin' H stock, ran 'em across the Mesa Seco country and roadbranded them with an HA for quick sale to the northern minin' camps. I could do all that—but I won't. I'm giving yuh a chance to sell out and get out."

The door opened abruptly and a big, bulky man in range clothes came barging in. He paused when he saw McVail. This was Crawford, the other Laredo gunman who had come to Timberlake to join the Ace of Spades pay roll.

Albright leaned over and palmed the door shut without taking his right hand from his gun. He looked at Crawford.

"If you got any ideas, shuck 'em," he said coldly. "Seein' yuh invited yoreself into this, get over by the window and—lissen."

Crawford shot a quick look at Gans. The slim gunman wore a poker face. Crawford hesitated.

"Get movin'!" Albright snapped.

The gunman looked him over with flat insolence. Then, getting no signal from either Gans or Allison, he shrugged and walked to the window.

Allison's brittle laugh speared through the tension in the room. "I'm calling your bluff, McVail. We're not leaving!"

McVail turned to him, his eyes coldly uncompromising. "I never bluff, Charley. You ought to know that from 'way back."

"Sure, I know you, McVail. From 'way back. Back to the days when we were teamed up and played the suckers on the river boats. You weren't a lawman then, giving orders. You were just Memphis McVail, who never gave a sucker an even break."

"Yuh've got a good memory," McVail interrupted dryly. "It'll make it easier for yuh to remember this. Get out by sundown tomorrow!"

There was silence in the room, heavy with the threat of violence. McVail turned and started for the door. Allison stopped him.

"There's a lot more I'm remembering—*Masters!*"

He was smiling with his mouth as the sheriff turned, playing his hole card, and he knew he had the lawman beaten.

"I knew that would bring you around, Jim," he sneered, slurring the name with insolent familiarity. "You didn't think I knew, did you? But I found out from Diamond Kate what your real name was. Found out the night she died aboard the *Mississippi Queen*. Jim Masters, who deserted a wife and two kids to run after Diamond Kate, queen of the riverboat entertainers!"

McVAIL'S face was white and twisted with bitter shame. Albright stiffened, his eyes on the sheriff.

"What are you going to do now?" Allison taunted. "Still going to run me out of Douglas?"

The sheriff was silent, his lips pressed tight against the pain of searing memory. Gans was smiling faintly and Crawford wore a scowl on his broad face.

"Get out!" Allison snapped, riding his advantage. "Get back to your office, and take that horse-faced deputy with you, Masters! Or I'll spread the story from Douglas to Cristobal!"

He stopped as McVail walked up to the desk and faced him across its wide surface. There was murder in the sheriff's twisted face.

"The story had to be told some time, Charley. But it'll be the last story yuh'll ever tell. I'll be around to attend to that tomorrow!"

The silence was thick as he turned and walked back toward the door.

"Come on, Al—let's go!"

Carson was in his private office in the bank when McVail and Albright entered. He looked up at them, surprise and apprehension mingling in his face. Then he put a smile of welcome on his thin lips.

"Mawnin', Sheriff," he said. "How are you, Al?"

The lawmen nodded.

Carson pushed back from his desk and motioned to a cigar box in front of him. "Take a couple, Jim. You, too, Al." His voice was genial. "Glad to see yo'all finally got down to business. Jailin' Bob Masters."

He shut up as the sheriff walked to him and tossed a letter on his desk. The lawman ignored the cigar box. Albright remained by the door, the cigar stub in his mouth, not saying anything. Carson looked at the letter without picking it up. Then he raised his eyes to the silent sheriff.

"I lost that letter about two weeks ago, Jim. Where did you find it?"

"I didn't find it," the sheriff said. "I got it from Brennan. Brennan took it from Bates, the night Jeff was killed."

Carson's gray eyebrows arched. "Are yo' trying to implicate me in Jeff's killin', Sheriff?"

McVail leaned over and tapped the water-smeared envelope with a blunt finger. "I don't have to. This does it for me."

"Why?" Carson said sharply. "What

are you trying to prove?"

"That you've known for some time the Kansas-Pacific was going to build through Timberlake," the sheriff said.

"So I have," Carson cut in brusquely. "That was my business, McVail!"

"And Allison's!" McVail snapped back. "That's why Allison had this letter and Bates came across it in his snooping. He stole it and went up to the El Dorado, not knowing Jeff was dead. He was going to sell it to Jeff."

Carson wet his lips. "Jeff was my friend, McVail. I loaned him money when he needed it, extended his loans when he couldn't meet the payments."

"It was a nice setup," growled the lawman, "for you. Yuh loaned him money and Allison broke him. Yuh worked with Charley to get control of the Tumblin' H, knowin' the K-P would be comin' in through Timber Pass."

"Yo' can't prove anything!" Carson suddenly snarled. "Yo're trying to run a bluff."

"That's the second time today I've been accused of that," McVail said. "I'm gettin' tired of it."

The banker sank back in his chair. "Yo' can't prove anything," he repeated.

"I wouldn't bet on it," the sheriff said. "It took me a long time to dig up the facts, Mark, to find out about that HA brand yuh filed up in Coahuilla County so that Allison's men could make a quick change to that iron on the cows they rustled. Cows they later ran north to Poke, Sabine and other minin' camps."

Carson wet his lips. The arrogance was stripped from him, and he looked old and gray.

"What do yo' want me to do?"

"Yuh're goin' to break up this phony Citizens Committee," McVail said. "And yuh're goin' to cancel that Tumblin' H loan. I don't care if that money has to come out of yore pocket—cancel it!"

"What about Allison?"

"Allison will be out of Timberlake Valley by tomorrow night, or he'll be dead!" the sheriff said.

Carson bowed his head. "All right, Jim," he said softly.

He kept staring down at his desk and he didn't look up as McVail and Albright left.

CHAPTER XVI

The Payoff

KENNY SAID, "Didn't take yuh too long, McVail," as the lawmen came into the office.

The sheriff shrugged. He walked to the desk, hung his hat on a hook beside it.

"Thanks, Kenny," he said.

The freight line manager hesitated, trying to read something in the faces of the two men. They were two of a kind—sheriff and deputy. Quiet, deliberate, they worked smoothly together.

"Socrates was in here a while back," he said, "lookin' for yuh, Jim."

The sheriff made no comment.

Albright walked to the cot and sprawled his lanky frame on it.

"Don't work too hard, Kenny," he said, as the other man shrugged and started for the door.

There was a long silence after the door closed, then Albright said:

"So that's why yuh never clamped down on the kid, Jim?"

The sheriff sat in his chair, facing the wall. He didn't turn.

"It's a long and not a pleasant story, Al." His voice sounded tired. "I left my wife and kids in Memphis after we'd been married six years. Couldn't stand the monotony of a clerking job. Mary was a frail sort of woman. She didn't want to leave town, didn't want to come West with me. So I finally chucked the whole thing and took to the riverboats. I met Charley in St. Louis. He was known as Silk Allison. We teamed up for a while, working the sidewheelers up and down the river. We didn't get along too well,

and finally we split up over a show girl."

"Diamond Kate?"

The sheriff turned around. "Yuh knew her?"

"Heard of her." Albright reached into his pocket for his sack of Bull Durham and rolled himself a smoke.

"There was trouble one night," McVail went on, "the same night I got this." He lifted his hand to the scar on his face. "Diamond Kate was shot. I never found out who did it. The *Missouri Queen* was set afire." He was looking back now, reliving the scene again. "River pirates."

He was silent for a moment, then shook off the bitter memory.

"I drifted West and lost touch with Charley. Finally my restlessness wore off. I went back to Memphis to see Mary. She was gone. I found out she had come out here to live with her brother, Jeff Halliday. I drifted some, not caring much what happened, and finally came to Timberlake. Mary had been dead for more than ten years. Halliday had never seen me. He wouldn't have recognized me anyway, with this. The kids had grown up. I decided I'd hang around. Keep an eye on them."

The sheriff rose and walked to the window and looked out.

"Then Charley showed up. And I knew there was goin' to be trouble."

Albright finished his cigarette without speaking.

Sam came in, his corncob stuck in his mouth. He glanced at Albright, then walked to McVail.

"Hear the news, Jim?"

McVail turned. "What news?"

"The Triangle herd's been raided. One of the Texas trail riders rode in with a slug in his shoulder and a story. Doc Stillwell fixed him up and a half-hour later he rode out of town with Brennan and the Tumblin' H boys. Lennie went with 'em."

He stopped and looked questioningly at McVail's stony face, then shifted his gaze to the deputy. "What yuh goin' to do about it, McVail?"

"Nothing," the sheriff answered bleakly. "Nothing—now. . . ."

LARRY BRENNAN slid out of saddle and walked to the Triangle chuckwagon.

"Hello, Chuck," he said.

Then he knelt by Jim and his face went hard. Hank was crouched over Jim, brushing flies from the wounded puncher's face.

"Reckon Duke told yuh what happened?" he said.

Brennan nodded. Hank looked up at the others. The Tumbling H men remained in saddle. Dr. Stillwell was climbing stiffly down. He reached up and untied his black bag from behind his saddle and turned toward them.

Duke and Lennie rode up together and dismounted.

The medico glanced professionally at Jim's bloodied shirt front.

"I'm going to need hot water and help," he said briskly. He looked at Lennie.

She nodded. "Whatever you say, Doctor." She began to roll up her sleeves.

Brennan walked back to his horse. Hank followed him, glancing curiously at the Tumbling H men.

"It's a cold trail," he said, waving upcanyon. "But cuss 'em, they drove 'em somewheres!"

Brennan nodded. "Where's Johnny?"

Hank shook his head. "Found his saddled hoss this mornin', after Duke left, but no sign of the kid." He watched Brennan mount.

Bill Tate spurred his animal alongside.

"Them cows of yores left tracks," he growled. "Let's find out where they went."

Before Brennan turned he caught the picture of Lennie, coming from the spring with a small bucket of water. She stopped and looked at him, and he kept that picture of her with him as he swung the black away from the wagon.

The cow tracks went upcanyon, swinging around a bend and ignoring the first angling break to the west. The earth underfoot became rocky. The vegetation thinned to spiky clumps. The sun leaned briefly on the western wall, then slid down out of sight.

Brennan finally reined in, frowning at

what seemed a blind pocket in the cliffs. Tate pulled alongside.

"Reckon this is it!" he growled. "Where in thunder would they go from here? Cows can't fly!"

"They drove 'em somewhere, Bill," Brennan said. "Mebbe we better camp here and wait till daylight."

"The kid!" Duke spurred alongside, pointing with his good arm. "Parson Johnny!"

The Triangle kid was riding out of the brush choking the far wall. He saw Brennan and suddenly hallooed, spurring his mount forward. Brennan caught the youngster by the arm as he rode up.

"Where have yuh been, kid?"

Johnny's brown face was sweat-streaked. His neckerchief was bound around his head, and he was hatless. He was bone-tired, but still eager.

"Beyond the cliffs, Larry," he said excitedly. "I follered the polecats. They've got our cows in a valley beyond the cliffs!"

"Take it easy," Brennan said. "What happened?"

Johnny took a deep breath. "I was out by the spring when they rode into camp last night. Didn't have a chance to get into the fight. After it was over they drove the cows upcanyon. I was afoot—they had scared our remuda—but I follered 'em. Found the small valley where they bedded the herd down. They're still there, Larry, restin' up. They had a wounded man with 'em." He sobered, glancing at Duke's bandaged arm. "How did we make out?"

"Carp, Red and Beefy are dead," Duke said. "Jim's hurt bad, and Chuck and Hank have lead in 'em."

Johnny wet his lips. "Well, I made one of 'em pay," he said slowly. "They sent a man out to guard the valley entrance." His fingers went up to his bound head, and his smile was grim. "That's how I got this Ace of Spades cayuse."

"How many of the polecats in that valley, kid?" asked Tate.

"I counted eleven."

The Tumbling H foreman glanced around him. "Ten of us, countin' Duke."

Duke nodded. "I can still use a gun."

"They won't be expectin' us," Brennan said quietly, staring toward the cliffs. "Mebbe we can turn the tables on 'em." He turned to the eager kid. "Lead the way, Johnny. . . ."

THE moon came up over the broken hills, paling the yellow stars that speckled the sable night. It caught the shadowy figures that rode through the narrow defile into the small valley, holding them briefly before they vanished into the velvet shadows along the river.

The Ace of Spades campfire was a flickering red eye against the night. A half-dozen men were playing poker around a blanket, squinting at their cards in the firelight. Several others were sprawled around in the flame glow. Samovar, the wounded man, was sleeping.

Johnson, the hired gunman, paced restlessly before the fire, his long shadow wavering across the poker players. "Plug" Stewart, Ace of Spades foreman, slammed his hand into the discards and turned to him.

"Cuss it, Ira, set down! It's hard enough to see what I'm holdin', without you prowlin' around in front of the fire!"

Johnson paused, feeling the rasping enmity in the burly, quick-tongued man. Firelight reddened the side of his bony face. He felt the heat of it mix with the quick flare of his anger and he turned away, the shadows hiding the swift glitter in his eyes.

He walked past Samovar into the thick shadows under the river oaks. The horses shifted restlessly at his approach. He paused by the side of a thick-chested sorrel, sliding a reassuring hand along the restive animal's flank.

"Blasted jughead!" he swore feelingly.

He and the burly foreman had never got along. Standing there he choked his anger back, knowing this was not the time nor the place to have it out with Plug.

A cool breeze touched his heated face. Johnson let his thoughts ride ahead of

him, back to Douglas, and what he was going to tell Allison. After a while he went back, pausing on the edge of the fire to watch the players again.

"Nesbit's takin' his time gettin' back, Plug."

Plug Stewart looked up. He was holding three aces, his first good hand since he sat down, and he didn't like Johnson's interruption.

"Cuss Nesbit!" he snarled. "I'm not his guardian. I sent him to guard the river entrance. If he ain't fell in that's what he's doin'."

One of the players guffawed. Ira stiffened.

"Just the same," he said, "I don't like it. Think I'll saddle up and ride around."

Plug turned back to the game. "Watch out for the night air," he said contemptuously, over his shoulder.

Johnson checked his reply. Too many easy raids had dulled the sharp edge of danger for these Ace of Spades hands. The devil with them, he thought. He was supposed to ride north with Stewart until they disposed of the herd, but Johnson suddenly decided to ride back to Douglas. He had an undefinable feeling that something had gone wrong. Last night's raid had put the Triangle out of the running, as far as any possible comeback might be contemplated. And by the time the Law could get around to investigating, the trail would be cold.

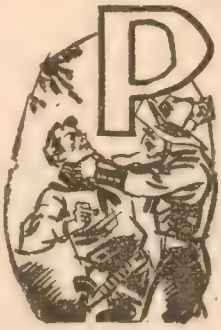
But he couldn't shake the suddenly nagging feeling of unrest.

He swung away from the fire and went back to the tethered horses. Saddling his sorrel he mounted and swung away from camp. He rode west, thereby missing the men who came silently from the north and began to spread out in the darkness beyond the campfire.

NEXT ISSUE
SANDSTONE'S GASOLINE BUGGY
by FRANCIS H. AMES
AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER XVII

"Stop Brennan!"



PLUG RAKED IN his winnings, and glared in the direction Johnson had gone.

"Some day I'm goin' to have it out with that jasper," he said harshly, looking into the shadows where Johnson had vanished. "Tryin' to give me orders! Tellin' me what to do! Cuss him, I run this outfit!"

No one disputed him. The game continued, with occasional curses from men who drew poor hands. Samovar awoke and called for water. One of the watchers went to him and held a canteen for him to drink from.

The fire flickered down. Plug picked up his cards, squinted at his hand, and cursed.

"Somebody rustle some wood for that fire! I can't see if I'm holdin' a jack or a lady with this pair of treys."

A man named "Monk" shrugged and got up. He was a squat man with a cast in his left eye. He walked a few yards past the fire in the direction of the river and bent to gather up some dry branches that lay around the base of a gnarled oak.

He saw the shadow move against the moonlighted stream. He straightened, dropping a hand to his Colt.

"Nesbit!" he called sharply. "That you, Nesbit?"

A red flare answered him. The slug spun him around. He clawed his gun out of holster and fired into the dirt at his feet as the second slug from the river smashed into him, dropping him.

Cards scattered wildly across the blanket as the men around it scrambled to their feet, cursing. Lead smashed at them from the darkness. One of the rustlers crumpled across the blanket, another made a jump for the darkness beyond the fire. He was hit in midair and fell limply

into the blaze, scattering the burning wood. The flame light became a small, uncertain thing against the darkness under the trees. Over it drifted the acrid odor of burning flesh.

Plug made a break for the river. He stumbled over Monk's body and went sprawling. That saved him from immediate death.

Brennan swore as he overshot the burly rustler, shot again at Plug's rolling, indistinct figure, then began to run toward him. Plug scrambled to his feet and flung a shot at the Texan.

The bullet gouged across Brennan's knuckles, tearing the Colt from his hand. Brennan kept running. He ploughed into the Ace of Spades foreman, driving his shoulder into Plug's stomach. The shock sent the man's Colt spinning into the shadows. Brennan fell on him, driving his bloodied fist into Plug's meaty face.

The rustler threshed wildly, trying to dislodge him. Brennan slammed his fist into Plug's face again. His knuckles split against Plug's teeth.

Plug choked, his mouth full of teeth and blood. He got the heel of his thick hand under Brennan's chin and shoved. Larry fell backward and Plug twisted, chopping down with his fist. The glancing blow rocked Brennan away from him, giving him momentary respite. He saw Brennan's Colt about ten feet away, glinting in a beam of moonlight filtering through the canopy of oak leaves. He made a dive for it.

Brennan landed on top of him as Plug's fingers closed over the weapon. Plug squirmed around, bringing the gun up toward the Texan. He got his finger in the trigger guard, and the first bullet went off between them. The orange-red flare was a dazzling flash, momentarily blinding them both.

Brennan's fingers groped for the gun as Plug fired again, shooting blindly. The bullet flicked cloth from Brennan's shoulder. Then his fingers found Plug's wrist and he twisted it inward. At the same time his right hand flicked across the hammer, fanning it.

Plug jerked as the bullet tore into him. He made a spasmodic motion that rolled him free of Brennan and blind instinct brought him to one knee, the Colt leveling at the Texan. The click of the hammer on a spent cartridge merged into the heavy roaring in his brain, and he scarcely felt the smash of Brennan's boot against his face.

When Larry Brennan went back into the shifting firelight, one of the Tumbling H men had dragged the body from the flames and tossed brush on the scattered embers.

Tate glanced at the trail boss, noting the gash across his right hand.

"Two dead by the river," Brennan said shortly. He looked around and felt relieved when he saw Duke and Johnny. "How many here?"

"Countin' yore two that makes seven who'll be doin' their rustlin' where it's plumb hot!" Tate growled. He motioned to a pair of sullen, disarmed men by the fire. Johnny was holding a gun on them. "These two decided to call it quits. There's a wounded galoot under that tree."

"That makes ten." Brennan frowned. "Yuh shore yuh counted eleven, Johnny?"

The kid nodded. "I follered 'em all the way. Countin' the wounded one there was eleven of the skunks."

TATE spat into the flames. "Reckon one got away."

He was not dissatisfied. This was the showdown he had waited for a long time. He was sorry Bob Masters had not been along.

"What we goin' to do with these two?" asked Lefty.

"String 'em up!" Tate snapped. To him that was the only logical conclusion to the career of a brand-blotter.

Brennan shook his head. "McVail's been askin' for proof. Here's his proof, Bill."

Tate held out for a quick hanging, but he was overruled by the majority of opinion that held with Brennan. Larry walked over to Johnny.

"Want to wrap my handkerchief around

this, kid?" He held up his bleeding hand.

The kid nodded. Tate came over and said, "Nichols got grazed across the ribs with a lucky shot from one of these polecats. Outside of that, and yore hand, Brennan, we didn't get a scratch."

Brennan looked into the flames. The picture of Lennie came back to him. Tall and slender, sleeves rolled back, stopping to look at him. The fading sun had been behind her, shadowing her features, but he felt the concern in her, and the clear beauty of that picture danced and then faded in the crackling fire.

"We'll wait until daylight before drivin' the cows back," he said, turning to Tate. "It's too tricky to try it through that slit canyon at night. . . ."

Lennie saw the cattle come around the canyon bend and the heaviness that had been with her all night ran out of her. She stood up and waited, feeling her heart pound at sight of the big man who swung his horse away from the herd to ride toward the wagon.

"All accounted for," Brennan said. "Nobody hurt." He waved his hand toward the cattle. "Yuh'll have 'em grazin' on Tumblin' H grass before night."

The cattle were not on Lennie's mind. "Your hand," she said. "You're hurt!"

He shrugged. The doctor came toward them.

"I'll have a look at it," the doctor said.

He paused to watch the herd swing past. Tate rode over as the doc cleaned and bandaged the cut on Brennan's hand. He saw the way Lennie was looking at Larry Brennan and was satisfied. The Texan would be good to her. She had been too much alone, and too concerned with her brother. It would be good for her to have a man take over some of her responsibility.

"We ought to make Tumblin' H grass in seven hours, pushin' 'em," he said. "We can scatter 'em past the North Fork ridges. Time enough to cut out and rebrand after we settle things in Douglas."

"Go ahead, Bill," Brennan said. "I'll stay with the wagon. I want to give the doc a hand with Chuck and Jim."

Hank had already hitched the team to the wagon. Chuck and Jim were carefully carried inside the vehicle. The doc climbed up beside Hank on the seat after tying his saddle horse behind the wagon.

"See you in town." He waved to Lennie and Brennan. "Go ahead. We'll make out all right."

Brennan and the girl turned away and spurred after the Triangle herd filing through the canyon mouth. . . .

CHARLEY ALLISON poured himself another drink. He turned and caught the bartender looking at him and his lips tightened.

The sun was westering. Bob Masters would be showing up pretty soon, unless the sheriff was running a bluff. But Allison knew Masters had not been bluffing.

He took a cigar from his vest pocket and lighted it, then tossed it away with a nervous gesture. He moved his shoulders, feeling the hardness of his shoulder holster against him, reassuring him. It had been a long time since he had killed a man, but the feeling was not new to him, and as he turned to pour himself another dring he felt the impatience go out of him, leaving him cold and expectant.

The swinging doors creaked on their hinges. Allison turned his head, his hand lifting to the front of his coat in swift, instinctive gesture. Then it fell away and a scowl darkened his face.

Mark Carson paused just inside the room, swinging his head around in quick survey. He saw Allison and came walking toward the bar, fast, and talking as he came.

"I want to see you, Charley. Upstairs —in your office!"

The gambler shrugged, a thin curl of contempt twisting his lips. Carson was going to pieces, just waiting. He took his bottle and glass from the bar and went upstairs. Carson followed. Allison walked around his desk and put the bottle and glass in front of him, then leaned back in his chair and surveyed the nervously pacing banker.

"Blast it, Mark—sit down!"

THE banker ignored the order. He paused, his face gray.

"What are yo' going to do, Charley?"

"Nothing!" the gambler snapped. "I'm going to let McVail make the moves. I told you that yesterday when you were over here."

"McVail won't back down!" Carson bleated. "Yo' know that, Charley—he won't back down!"

"I've got eight men downstairs," Charley reminded him coldly. "Men I hired because they could handle guns. If the Law comes pushing in here tonight, there's going to be a couple of vacancies in that department in the morning."

Carson shook his head. He had sought power ever since coming to Timberlake Valley, sought it for his own sake. It had never been enough. He had found out the Kansas-Pacific was building west through the valley, and had known then that he wanted the Tumbling H. He had made a deal with Allison to break Halliday, thinking he could remain safely in the background if anything went wrong.

Time—and the Law—had finally caught up with him. The arrogance based on the unstable foundation of his power tottered with its collapse. He had but one thought now—to try to save himself from the dishonor that was soon to come to him and his family.

"It'll backfire," he said bitterly. "The whole thing. Yo' can't shoot the Law without some kind of an investigation from outside."

Allison got up, breaking coldly into the banker's statement.

"Shut up, and do what I tell you! Let me handle McVail and Albright. And tomorrow you take care of that Tumbling H loan. Call it in. Don't forget, those surveyors will be here in another two weeks."

Carson bowed his head. "I should never have got mixed up with yo'."

"It's too late to start getting religion," Allison snapped. "You get back to the bank and sit it out. We'll handle the Law when it comes around."

He sat back, chewing on a new cigar, after Carson left. After a while he got up and went out to the balcony.

Johnson came into the barroom, slamming the batwings against the wall. The lanky killer carried trouble with him. Allison sensed it in the way Johnson crossed the room to the bar, he heard it in Johnson's raspy voice as he faced Barney across the counter.

"Where's Charley?"

"Up here!" Allison called, while the bartender was opening his mouth.

Johnson whirled and headed for the stairs. Crawford and Gans were at the bar. They turned to look after Johnson, and Allison caught their eyes and motioned them to follow. They eased into his office behind Johnson, closing the door behind them. Allison whirled on the lanky gunman.

"What's happened, Ira? What's gone wrong?"

"Everythin'!" the killer snapped. "Cuss it, everythin's gone wrong, Charley! Just because that jughead *segundo* of yores got careless—"

"What happened?"

Johnson caught himself and forced his anger back.

"Wiped out," he said harshly. "Plug and the rest of the boys, except Samovar, Kelly and Gantwell. I saw 'em when I slipped back, after the firin' stopped."

Allison's face corded. "Blast it, Johnson! Start from the beginning. What happened at Lost Springs?"

Johnson told him, leaving out no details, sprinkling his narrative with contempt for Plug.

"I don't know what happened to Nesbit," he concluded. "Probably ran into Brennan and the Tumblin' H men." He gathered his breath, his lips flattening against his teeth. "Brennan was there, Charley! And I thought I killed him."

"It was Brennan all right," Allison gritted.

Johnson's voice was harsh. "He'll be comin' to town!"

"Let him come! I'm not running!" Allison looked at Crawford and Gans. "There's almost a dozen of us here, count-

ing Barney behind the bar. We'll stop Brennan and what's left of the Tumbling H right here in the Casino!"

Crawford looked at Gans. The slim Laredo gunster shrugged.

"We'll be downstairs, Charley." His voice was noncommittal.

They went out.

Allison's lips curled. He knew their kind. They stuck by a man who hired them as long as they saw him ahead of the game, as long as he could pay.

CHAPTER XVIII

Jail Break

GANS AND CRAWFORD went out through the back door to the shed behind the Casino and saddled their horses. They rode out through the alley to the street and turned south. The rode unhurriedly. At the bank they dismounted, droping reins over the hitchrail, and turned to the door.

Vanity Carson came out as they paused on the walk. They both looked after her as she passed.

"Pretty trick," Crawford said. He grinned crookedly. "Too bad we can't take her with us."

They opened the door and stepped inside. There were no other customers in the bank. The cashier was in his cage, totaling receipts for the day. Crawford stayed by the door. Gans walked unhurriedly to the window.

The Laredo gunman took his Colt out of holster and laid the barrel on the shelf of the pay window.

"Pass over everythin' yuh have, bud," he said quietly. "Don't make a fuss and yuh won't get hurt."

The clerk stiffened. His eyes left Gans for Crawford. The blocky gunman was sliding the bolt back on the door. Then he walked to the windows and started pulling down the shades. It was past closing time and the move, seen from outside, would arouse no curiosity.

The clerk began stuffing specie and bills into a small canvas sack. Gans glanced at the clock over the door.

"Hurry it up!"

Behind the low mahogany railing to the left of the cashier's cage was a door with a sign lettered in gold paint:

MARK CARSON—Private

The banker was behind that door, slumped at his desk. Vanity had just been in to see him. She had been unusually affectionate, and he was glad she would be leaving on the morning stage for St. Louis.

He heard the scrape of booted feet in the room outside his office and then the sounds of the shades being pulled down. He glanced methodically at his heavy gold watch. Four-thirty. Tom was closing up.

Carson pushed his chair back and got up. He walked heavily to the door, opened it, and came out into the small space behind the railing.

Gans whirled and fired. The move was reflexive. Carson staggered, an amazed expression on his face. Gans shot again, his lips curling in an animal snarl. Carson seemed to trip over an invisible barrier. He fell against the railing and slid down.

Gans reached inside the cashier's cage and jerked the canvas sack away from the clerk's nerveless fingers. He shot the man before turning away, shot him out of pure viciousness, as a vent to his rage at the unexpected flaw in his smoothly planned getaway.

Crawford had the door open. Gans ran across the room and followed him into the street. . . .

Jim McVail, now Jim Masters, and his deputy left Kenny in the office and went down the walk. They met Vanity Carson on the corner. The sheriff tipped his hat.

"Good afternoon, Vanity."

She nodded, giving him a tremulous smile. She was dressed for traveling and was carrying a small hand bag.

"Yore father still at the bank?"

"'Yes." She was impatient and nervous and Albright turned to look after her.

"Think she's goin' in to see Bob, Jim?"

The sheriff shrugged. "She's leavin' in the mornin', goin' East. Might be she wants to say good-by to Bob."

They went up the street, crossed over to Main, and paused on the walk across from the bank. Albright squinted at the building.

"Shades are down," he noted laconically. "Looks like Carson closed up and went home."

"Sometimes he stays behind in his office," Masters said. "Let's take a look."

The shots were muffled behind the closed doors, but they reached across the street like a warning gong.

"What the devil!" Albright said.

Then deputy and sheriff pivoted as one and headed for the bank.

There was another shot just as the door swung open. Crawford appeared on the walk, gun in hand. He slammed a shot at the sheriff and made a run for one of the horses at the rail. He got a foot in the stirrup and was lifting himself into saddle when Masters' bullet stiffened him.

GANS came jumping out, his gun spitting. The sheriff stumbled as a bullet gashed his right leg. He went down, shooting high, smashing a window in the bank behind Gans.

Albright spun around and sat down. Crawford was trying to get to his feet. Gans made a flying leap over him, still holding the canvas bag in his left hand. He got into saddle and Albright's shot killed the animal under him.

Gans rolled free. He whirled, made a jump for the other horse. The frightened animal was breaking away from the rail, its reins dragging. Gans hit saddle and flattened himself along the animal's neck. He made a bad target and the sheriff missed.

Masters started to limp after him. Albright sat in the middle of the street. He couldn't get up. He saw Crawford move. The outlaw was lining his Colt on the sheriff.

Albright steadied his muzzle with his left hand and pulled trigger. Crawford slumped into the dust without firing.

It was over before men, spilling out into the street, realized what had happened. They grouped around Albright and stared at the sheriff as he came limping back.

"Got away!" Masters gritted. "But he can't get far. My last shot hit his hoss."

The clerk staggered out of the bank. "McVail! Bank robbed—Carson shot!"

Several men caught him as he collapsed. The rest of them were scattering for guns and horses.

"Comin', Sheriff," one of them said.

Masters shook his head. "Yuh can run him down without me. I'm gettin' Al to the doc's."

"Stillwell's out of town," the man said.

"I know," Masters nodded. "Tepple will have to do."

"That hoss doctor!" snorted the man, whirling away. . . .

Kenny cautiously slid the bolt back on the door and opened it slightly, the shotgun between him and the person who stood outside.

"I want to see Bob Masters," Vanity Carson said.

Kenny frowned. "I'm sorry, Miss Carson—"

"Please!" the girl said. "I'll be only a few minutes. I'm leaving town early tomorrow morning. I want to say good-by."

Kenny hesitated. McVail had left orders to let no one in while he and Albright were gone. But the bucktoothed man saw no harm in this pale-faced girl with the shadows under her dark eyes.

"Just a few minutes, Miss Carson," he agreed. He smiled as she came inside. "You look as though you are ready to travel now."

He took the keys from the hook and led the way. Bob was pacing around in his cubicle. He stopped when Kenny said, "Visitor for you, Masters." He looked at Vanity and a faint smile eased the tension around his mouth.

Kenny fitted a key in the lock and turned it.

"I'll wait in the corri—"

His jaw dropped and his eyes grew round. He was looking into the muzzle of a small bore pistol in the hand of Miss Carson, and if he saw no hostility in the eyes behind it, he saw determination.

Bob came swiftly to his side and clamped a hand over the shotgun's hammer before Kenny could move. He jerked the gun from Kenny's hand and shoved him roughly aside.

"Keep yore face shut!" he snarled, "or they'll find a corpse in that cell!"

He clanged the door shut and turned the key in the lock. Then he turned to the girl standing rigidly by the bars.

"All right," he said, his voice gentler. "Yuh can put that gun away now, Vanity."

The girl's arm went limp at her side.

"I've got the horses out in front," she said. "Across the street, so McVail wouldn't suspect anything. Hired them earlier this afternoon and brought them there." Her voice came swiftly. "We'll have to hurry!"

Masters shook his head. "I'm not leavin'. Not right away."

He started as shots broke out north of the jail. Then he swung around, poking the muzzle of the shotgun through the bars.

"Where's McVail?"

The savagery in his face shook the bucktoothed man. He had heard stories about Masters and knew that the young fellow would kill him when he was in that mood. He wet his lips.

"Gone to the Casino, to see Allison."

Masters turned and strode into the office, ignoring the white-faced girl in the corridor. He tossed the shotgun and the keys on the cot and began to pull out drawers in the sheriff's desk. He found his own gun and belt in one of them.

Vanity came into the office as he was buckling the belt around his waist.

"Bob!" She caught his arm as he started to swing away. "If we leave now we'll have our chance at happiness! Don't let me down! I did this for you—for us. I know you didn't kill your uncle. I want to ride with you, live with you somewhere far from here. Isn't that what you wanted?"

He shook off her hand. He was past listening to her, to anyone. He had paced that narrow cell with one thought growing, clamoring in his mind. Kill McVail!

She caught him at the door, wedging her body between him and the panel.

"If you leave me now, we're through! You hear that? Through!"

She was a slip of a girl, fighting for what she wanted. She had been a shy, moody girl most of her life, but now her her eyes were afire with bitter challenge.

Her intensity stopped him. He looked down into her face, knowing that he wanted her, had always wanted her since the day he had come riding back from beyond the Diamond Heads, a half-wild button on a dusty sorrel, and had seen her sitting her saddle on the rim of the desert, alone and girlishly wondering, watching the setting sun paint the mesas deep purple.

Her love of solitude, her quiet delight in the beauty of the desert, her quick eagerness which revealed itself to him as they talked, had kindled liking in him. And in the two years that had followed, despite the stern disapproval of the elder Carson, they had seen much of each other.

He didn't want to lose her. Yet he couldn't leave with her. Not yet. He bent and gathered her in his arms and kissed her. All his restlessness, his wildness, was in that kiss. Then he lifted her out of his way and stepped out.

He had sworn to kill McVail when he got out, and nothing short of death would stop him now.

THE TRAIL TO CRAZY MAN

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CHAPTER XIX

The Reckoning

VANITY REMAINED in the doorway. Inside the jail Kenny was beginning to yell for help. The girl slumped against the door frame, her mind numb, not caring what happened. She didn't hear Sam's voice until he ran across the street and shook her.

"Bob!" he cried. "My Gawd, girl! Yuh didn't—didn't let him out!"

She nodded. Kenny was making a racket inside.

"We had it all planned," she said. "We were going away together. I thought he meant it. I believed him. But he used me."

"Where? Where did he go?"

"To the Casino. He's gone to kill McVail!"

The shock of it grayed Socrates Sam's face. "Good glory, girl! He can't do that! McVail's his father!"

Vanity looked up into his contorted face, not comprehending. Sam pushed past her. He found the jail keys on the cot and ran into the corridor.

Kenny was yelling at the door. He stopped when he saw Sam.

"That girl! She held a gun on me!"

"Never mind that!" Sam growled. "We've got to stop that wild kid. Stop him before he makes the biggest mistake of his hot-headed life!"

"What happened?" Kenny snapped.

"Crawford and Gans robbed the bank. They shot Carson and young Tom Blaine. Albright and the sheriff shot it out with 'em. Albright was hurt. Crawford never got into saddle. But Gans made it out of town with a posse right behind him."

"Where's the sheriff?"

"Gone to the Casino," Sam said. He had the door open, swinging it wide. "Come on! We've got to round up help. Somebody's got to back up McVail!"

Vanity was standing in the doorway, staring at him as he turned. He brushed past her, reached into the wall rack for a rifle. Kenny picked up the shotgun Bob had tossed on the cot. Vanity clutched Sam's arm as he made for the door.

"My father!" she cried. "I heard you tell Kenny my father was shot!"

"Yes," Sam said, pitying her. "Shot pretty badly, Vanity. Doc Tepple don't think he'll live."

The girl stood stricken as they left. Then she followed, began to run toward the bank. . . .

Larry Brennan reined to a halt on a rise in the river trail. Lennie was at his side. The others crowded around.

"Looks like trouble," the big Texan said, pointing down toward Douglas. "There's a posse raisin' dust out of town or I need glasses!"

Lennie turned a white face toward him. "It can't be Bob! He couldn't have—" She didn't finish the thought.

Whoever the rider was ahead of that posse, he was too far away to be recognized. They were small motes raising dust on the winding trail.

Tate pushed alongside Brennan.

"We better get down there and find out what's happened. Mebbe Bob did get out."

They swept down onto Douglas. Socrates Sam and Kenny were cutting across the street as Brennan drew up in front of the bank where a small group of older men and women and wide-eyed children were looking at Crawford's body still lying in the street.

"Brennan!" Sam yelled. "Bob's on the loose!" He came running up, winded and a little incoherent. "He's gone after McVail. Stop him! The young fool don't know McVail's his father!"

Brennan looked down at Sam. "What yuh gettin' at?"

"Go on—stop him!" the undertaker yelled. "I'll explain it later. But there's no time now, Brennan. Stop him from killin' McVail. The sheriff's Jim Masters, Bob's father!"

"Where?" Brennan snapped. "Where's McVail?"

"In the Casino! Gone for a showdown with Allison!"

Brennan pivoted his weary mount. Tate crowded him. "I heard Sam," he said. "If McVail's gone gunnin' for Allison I want to be in on it."

Lennie looked down at Sam, the shock of his words holding her in saddle.

"Sam, what's happened?"

"Vanity got yore brother out of jail," Sam said. "Bob left her to go to the Casino —to kill McVail. But McVail's yore father!"

The girl dismounted, lithe as a tigress. "How do you know that, Sam?"

"I've known for a long time," Sam said. "Ever since he dropped his watch at my place one night, after helpin' to bring in a body. There was a small copy of that family picture yuh've got back at the ranch inside his watch case. He told me the whole story later."

The shots that broke out in the Casino, far down the street, were like periods falling into place, ending the story of Jim Masters, alias Sheriff Jim McVail.

Sam turned. Brennan and the Tumbling H riders were just swinging in toward the Casino rails.

"Looks like it's too late," he said, and began to walk down the street toward the sounds of gunfire. . . .

ALLISON was waiting with his back against the long bar when McVail thrust aside the batwings and limped in. The sheriff paused, sliding his steely glance about the big gaming room, picking out the men scattered at tables and under the balcony. Allison had called him, fortifying his hand with hired guns. But Allison was going to die before the sun set. The knowledge was in Jim Masters as he stood there, sensing the trap Allison had set. No one in this gambling hall could stop him from doing that.

He had waited and watched while Allison had reached out for power in the valley. He had stood by while Halliday's spread had been stripped and plundered, not daring to buck Allison because of what Charley knew. He had not wanted his children to find out, but Allison had forced his decision.

Allison sensed the finality in the scarred lawman as Masters began to walk toward the bar. He resisted the desire to glance up at the balcony, to reassure himself that Johnson was up there in the shadows, a gun in his hand, covering the sheriff.

"The sun's getting red in the street," McVail said.

Allison smiled. "You didn't really think I'd leave town, did you, Jim?"

"It would have been yore first smart move in a long time," McVail answered. He looked around at the waiting men, waiting for him to move.

"A couple of yore men pulled out on yuh," he said. "Crawford and Gans." He saw the flicker in Allison's eyes. "I thought yuh'd like to know. Crawford's dead. They held up the bank on their way out. Gans will be swingin' from the end of a rope inside an hour."

Allison shrugged. "That was Gans' mistake. Not mine. I'm going to be here a long time, Jim—long after you're gone!"

"One thing, Charley," the sheriff said, as if making a last request. "You killed Diamond Kate, didn't yuh?"

Allison's eyes met the sheriff's. "I knew her first, Jim. And then you came, cutting me out. She threw me over for you, and no woman could do that."

The slamming of the batwings made a harsh, clacky sound that dribbled off into the powder-keg stillness.

Bob Masters paced into the room and wheeled to face his father!

It was Ira Johnson who stopped Bob from killing Jim Masters. He did it without intention. Waiting in the shadows on the balcony, he was tensed for a move from the sheriff that would be his signal to shoot. Bob's sudden entrance set off his taut nerves. He stepped out of the shadows and fired.

McVail staggered against the bar.

Young Masters pivoted and fired by reflex, his bullet splintering the rail close to Johnson, driving the gunman back. Allison whirled, making a run for the stairs.

The sheriff steadied himself against the

bar. His voice struck out, shaping his actions. "Get him, Bob! Get Allison!"

Bob obeyed, not knowing why, moving to something in the sheriff's tone, some implicit faith that Bob would do his bidding. The young fellow had expected to find the sheriff in close collaboration with Allison, and the shock of finding that he and McVail had stepped into a loaded trap brushed aside his primary purpose.

His first shot spun Charley Allison around before the gambler reached the end of the bar. Allison turned, a gun in his hand, and took two slugs in him, another from young Masters and one from the sheriff, holding tight to the edge of the bar. He went down, on his knees first, as if reluctant to die, and the last thing he saw was young Masters running toward the bar, and Jim Masters, grinning crookedly, thumbing the hammer of his Colt.

Bob was hit before he reached the sheriff. Masters lurched away from the counter, spun Bob behind him, and emptied his Colt at the men shooting from across the room. Then he bent over Bob, shielding the fallen young man with his body.

Brennan and the Tumbling H men burst into the gambling hall then. Johnson fired at the big Texan, his bullet drawing Brennan's attention. Johnson cursed as his hammer clicked against a spent cartridge. Brennan was coming up the stairs.

The gunslinger ran back into Allison's office, crossed the room to the door opening on back stairs. A bullet from down in the yard splintered wood near his face. He met Brennan in the doorway.

JOHNSON threw his useless Colt at the Texan and drew his knife. Brennan hit him before he got it free, spinning him against the wall. Johnson squirmed away as Brennan closed in. He stepped back, felt the railing hard against his back, and slipped his knife free as Larry Brennan came for him. Brennan caught his arm, twisted, and heaved. Johnson gave a sharp cry as he went over the railing.

Brennan put his hands on the balustrade and looked down into a suddenly quiet scene. Two of Allison's gunslingers were lined up against the east wall, not wanting any more of this fight. One was sitting on the floor near Johnson's broken body, holding his hand tight against the hole in his stomach. Three others were definitely out of the fight.

Brennan turned and walked downstairs. Bill Tate was standing beside Bob, looking down at the sheriff's body. A bullet had creased Bob's head, and the blood ran down his stubbled cheek like a red gash in his face, making him resemble the scarred man who had stood over him, shielding him with his body.

"I came in to kill him," he was saying, "and instead I helped him kill Allison. Why, Bill?" He looked down at his father, wondering. "Why did he do it?"

"Sam'll tell yuh," Brennan said, moving toward them. "It's a long story. Let's get out of here. . . ."

They buried Jim Masters on the knoll beside his wife and Jeff Halliday. Bob left them as they walked back to the ranch. He mounted his horse and rode toward town, and Brennan, standing beside Lennie, knew he was going to see Vanity Carson.

"Carson cleared up a lot of things before he died," said Socrates Sam, watching Bob top the rise in the river trail. "If he hadn't confessed to killin' Jeff a lot of people might still be thinkin' Bob did it."

Tate grunted. "Never figgered Carson as a killer."

Brennan looked up at Lennie. She was on the stairs, staring at the river road, and after a while, she turned and caught his look.

"I'll be leavin'—" he said.

Her eyes held his steadily, and he saw in them what he wanted to see.

"I've got to send Barstow a wire," he said. "And I want to drop into doc's office and see Chuck and Jim. I want to see Duke and Johnny and Hank. I want to say good-by."

"Good-by?"

He nodded. "They'll be leavin' for Texas soon. But I'm stayin' here."

He saw the confirmation in Lennie's eyes, and the gladness, as he turned away.

COMANCHE — BRAVE WARRIOR

The Only Survivor of Custer's Last Stand!

A True Story by

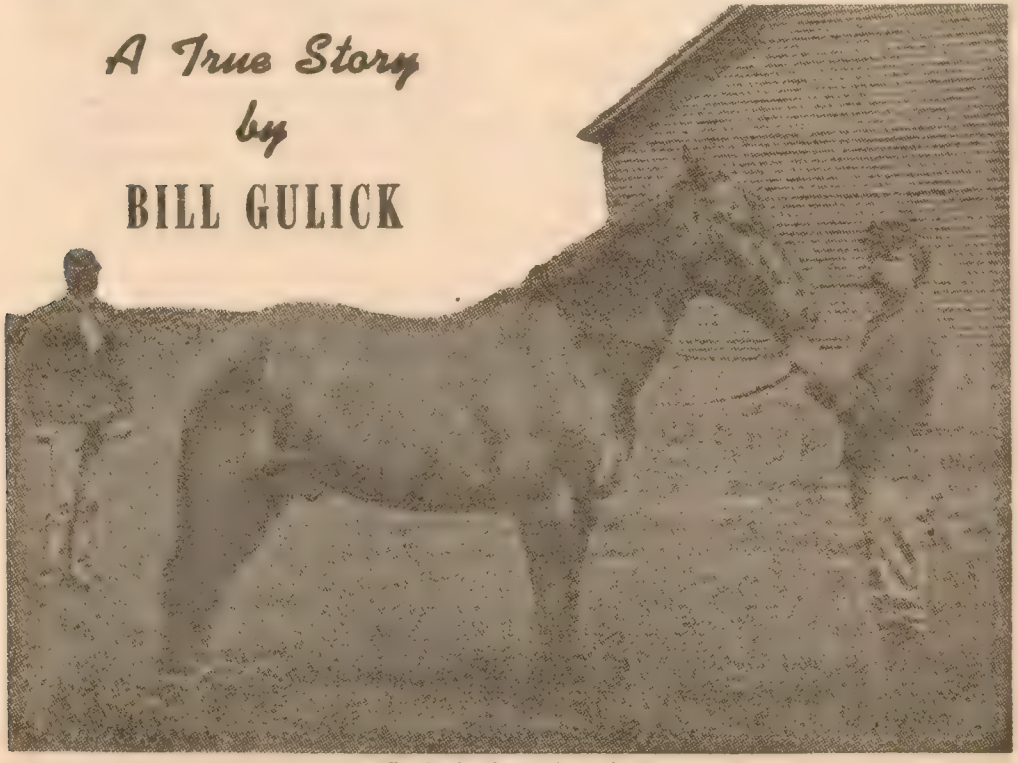
BILL GULICK

THERE were no human survivors of that battle on the Little Big Horn, commonly known as the Custer Massacre, in which the Sioux wiped out Custer and 230 of his officers and men in the bloodiest hour the West ever knew. Not a single white man lived to tell the true story of the battle. But there was one survivor—an eye-witness who, if he had been endowed with speech, could have told stories to which the whole world would have listened enthralled. That was the horse Comanche—the only thing left living on the battlefield after the Sioux had finished their terrible slaughter.

Comanche was the favorite mount of Captain Myles Keogh, commander of I Company. Though there is some disagreement as to where and how the horse was obtained, fairly reliable evidence indicates that it originally belonged to the Comanche Indians who roamed over the plains of the Texas Panhandle.

Seventh Regiment Subdues Indians

The Seventh U.S. Cavalry Regiment under (Bvt.) Major General Custer, spent several years in the Southwest, subduing the Plains Indians. In 1867, the Seventh had a particularly sharp brush with the Comanches on the *Llano Estacado* (Staked Plains) in which the Indians were routed. Captain Keogh's horse was shot out from



The Battle Charger Comanche

under him during the fight and Custer allowed him to select a replacement from among the herd of horses captured from the Indians.

Captain Keogh, like the horse he chose, was a born fighter. A big, hard-muscled Irishman with a bristling reddish-brown beard, he was as colorful a soldier of fortune as the frontier knew. He had fought in the armies of several European countries. He had fought in Mexico. Now he wore the blue cavalry uniform of the United States, and wore it well. He had a reputation for being a hard-drinking man with a wild Irish temper, a difficult man to get along with at times, but one of the best officers in the regiment when the Seventh went into action.

Keogh Selects Mount

Keogh knew horses. The mount he picked was a sturdy, thick-chested animal somewhat heavier and not as fast as the other officer's horses. In color it was halfway between a bay and a chestnut—a shade which in the West is called "claybank." Because of the circumstances under which it was obtained, he named the horse Comanche.

Comanche proved to be an ideal cavalry mount, being strong, long-winded and cool under fire. He got his first wound-stripe in the Battle of the Washita when the Seventh made a mid-winter surprise attack against the Cheyennes. In the autumn of 1868, the regiment was stationed at Camp Supply in what is now northwestern Oklahoma. For some time the Cheyennes had been troublesome. Winter closed in early, an unusually severe winter for that part of the country, but instead of suspending operations until spring came as was customarily done, Custer persuaded General Phil Sheridan to let him carry out a winter campaign against the Indians.

Start Amid Blizzard

Late in November, the Seventh set out from Camp Supply in a raging blizzard, determined to seek out the Cheyennes in their winter villages. Day after day the eight hundred odd men and horses marched southward through bitter subzero weather over plains blanketed with snow. At last the Osage scouts, ranging ahead, hurried back with the news that they had discovered a large village of Cheyennes camped in the valley of the Washita River.

During the night, the regiment made a forced march, halting just over the ridge from the sleeping village. Custer divided his men into three battalions, then when dawn came the troopers struck with the suddenness of lightning from three different directions. The battle was sharp but brief, as the surprised Cheyennes awoke to find their village swarming with bluecoats.

Comanche Shows No Fear

Captain Keogh and Comanche charged at the head of I Company, part of the battalion under Custer's direct command. In less than an hour, the fight was over. Comanche behaved like a veteran, paying no heed to noise, the smell of gunsmoke and blood and the cries of the wounded around him. Captain Keogh, as he went about reassembling his scattered company, had good reason to be pleased with his selection.

"Captain Keogh!" a fellow officer cried suddenly, "your horse is wounded!"

Keogh twisted around in the saddle and saw to his surprise that an arrow was deeply imbedded in Comanche's hip. The horse had given no sign that he was wounded. Dismounting, Keogh summoned an enlisted man to hold the animal while he took out his knife and cut the wickedly barbed arrowhead out of Comanche's flesh. The horse withstood the painful operation as stoically as any Indian. When he had finished, Captain Keogh patted Comanche's neck and said with a smile:

"Now, old fellow, you've got a wound-stripe that doesn't have to be sewed on."

Becomes Battle Charger

From that day until Keogh's final battle in the valley of the Little Big Horn, the officer rode no other horse into action. On long marches he often used other mounts, saving Comanche's strength, but whenever a skirmish with the Indians was imminent he wasted no time in switching his saddle to Comanche's sturdy back.

The horse served with him through two

more years in the Southwest in campaigns against the Cheyennes and Comanches of western Indian Territory and the Texas Panhandle. In 1870, the regiment left the Southwest and was sent to Kentucky, where for three years it aided Reconstruction work in the South. Even in that land of blooded thoroughbreds, Captain Keogh did not forsake his mount for a faster, more spirited animal, as did many of his fellow officers, but clung steadfastly to Comanche.

Regiment Returns to West

What the plains-bred horse thought of Kentucky blue grass and the slim-legged thoroughbreds it raised, will never be known, of course, but it must have been as much a relief to Comanche as it was to his master when the Seventh Cavalry got orders to leave Kentucky and proceed to Bismarck, Dakota Territory. Neither man nor horse had the gentle breeding and manners of the South. Both were glad to return to their specialty—Indian fighting.

It was a long ways from Kentucky to Dakota. The regiment, whose companies had been scattered all over the South, reassembled at Memphis and went by boat to Cairo, Illinois. There, horses, baggage and men were transferred to troop trains, which over a course of tiresome days made their way to Yankton, Dakota Territory. The railroad ended here, and ahead of the regiment—made soft by its long sojourn in the mild Kentucky climate—lay five hundred miles of bleak, windswept plains.

Though it was mid-April, a late blizzard swept down on the camp at Yankton the very first night. Several of the men and many of the horses died of exposure. Then, as the long march up the Missouri River began, the weather changed abruptly from winter to summer, torturing men and animals with heat and dust. It was truly a test of horseflesh, and several of the Kentucky thoroughbreds fell by the wayside. Comanche seemed to thrive on hardship.

Regiment Arrives at Bismarck

The Seventh reached Bismarck, at that time a handful of drab frame buildings squatting on the bluffs on the east side of the muddy Missouri, in June. The new post of Fort Abraham Lincoln was to be established on the west side of the river, but work had not yet been started on it, and the regiment did not linger there very long for one of its first duties was to escort a large party of engineers westward across Dakota and up the Yellowstone River, guarding them from the hostile Sioux as they surveyed a contemplated route for the Northern Pacific Railroad.

The Sioux, in that summer of 1873, had good reason to be hostile. Only five years before, the Indian leaders had signed a treaty with the U.S. assuring them of all the lands west of the Missouri. The coming of the railroad would mean an end to their rule over the region. But the survey party and its escort of soldiers were too strong to be attacked directly, so the Sioux had to be content with harassing the expedition when and where they could, then fleeing when faced by superior numbers.

Tension Increases

During the next two years, the tension between white man and red continued to increase. Gold was discovered in the Black Hills in 1874, and no law, no threat, nothing short of a bullet could stop feverish-eyed prospectors from swarming into the land which the Sioux regarded as their own. The vast area west of the Missouri soon became a bitterly contested No-man's-land, with murders and massacres being committed by whites and Indians alike.

At last, in 1876, the Government issued a stern ultimatum to the Sioux: "Lay down your arms and go back to your reservations by January 31 or we will put you back by force."

The Sioux remained ominously silent.

Hostile Tribes Gather

As spring came, rumors drifted in that all the hostile tribes in the Northwest were gathering in the mountainous region along the upper Yellowstone in what is now southern Montana. The Indian Department gave up trying to settle matters peaceably and turned the whole problem over to the Army, which, under the direction of General Phil Sheridan, mapped out a campaign whose size dwarfed any and all previous efforts.

General Crook with nearly two thou-

sand men was to march north from Wyoming and block the hostiles' escape southward between the Rosebud and Big Horn Mountains. Colonel Gibbon, with four hundred infantrymen and several batteries of Gatling guns, was to march eastward from western Montana and meet Custer and the six hundred odd men of the Seventh on the Yellowstone, then they would close in on the Sioux from the north.

It had been originally planned that Custer was to be in charge of the northern end of the campaign, but he made the mistake of criticizing the corrupt Secretary of War Belnap, who happened to be President Grant's friend, and at the last minute Grant put General Alfred Terry in command. In fact, it was only through Terry's intervention that Custer was allowed to ride at the head of his own regiment.

Regiment Leaves Fort

Early in June, the Seventh left Fort Lincoln. Three weeks later it made the rendezvous with Colonel Gibbon on the Yellowstone, then proceeded up that river until the mouth of the Rosebud was reached. A reconnaissance party was sent out, returning with the word that they had struck a fresh Indian trail leading west from the Rosebud toward the divide, beyond which lay the valley of the Big Horn River.

In the conference which was held that night, it was decided that Gibbon and Terry would proceed on up the Yellowstone until they struck the Big Horn, then they would swing south and follow up that stream. Custer, meantime, would ascend the Rosebud until he came upon the Indian trail, then he would follow it westward across the mountains until he sighted the Indian camp, which, it was suspected, would be in the valley of the Big Horn. Though no word had come from General Crook, it was assumed that he was marching up from the south, and would converge on the hostiles at about the same time as the other two groups.

Custer Seeks Glory

On June 22, the Seventh set out up the Rosebud. Custer's orders had been somewhat elastic, leaving him a certain amount of leeway in doing whatever the situation demanded, and, smarting under the rebuke handed him by the President, he seems to have been determined to do something spectacular and thus redeem himself. In three hard days of riding, the regiment struck the Indian trail, crossed the Rosebud Mountains and descended into the valley of the Little Big Horn a few miles above the junction of that river with the Big Horn.

The date was June 25, 1876. Terry and Gibbon were not due at the rendezvous until the next day. Nothing had been heard from General Crook, but Custer no doubt assumed that he was not far away to southward. Perhaps if Custer had known that only a few days previous Crook had fought a bitter draw with a strong force under the Sioux Chief Crazy Horse and even now was sitting in camp nursing his wounds, he would not have been so eager to tackle the Sioux village. But attack he did.

Red Multitudes Attack

Historians are still arguing as to how many Sioux warriors Custer faced that day, the estimates running as high as six thousand. Four thousand is probably a more reasonable figure. Custer had a total of six hundred men, armed with single-shot Springfield carbines whose ammunition was not only scant but of a very poor quality. The Sioux, well supplied by crooked Indian agents and white traders, had new Winchester and Henry rifles, magazine guns which would shoot seven times without reloading, with ammunition to burn. To make matters worse, Custer made the fatal mistake of splitting his forces.

Captain Benteen took three companies and rode off to the south on a scout. Major Reno took three companies, crossed the Little Big Horn and attacked the Sioux village from the upper end. Lieutenant McDougal and one company were far in the rear guarding the pack train. Custer himself took the remaining five companies and rode down the right bank of the river on the east side, evidently intending to attack the lower end of the village.

Detachments Fall Back

What happened to the battalion under

Custer during those next few hours is a question which will never be answered. Major Reno, finding the Sioux too much for his handful of men, retreated to the bluffs on the east side of the river, where he was soon joined by Captain Benteen's battalion and Lieutenant McDougal's company. Together, they managed to hold off the swarms of Sioux for two days, though suffering terrific casualties.

Custer and the 230 men with him were not so fortunate. The Sioux wiped them out to the last man. When Terry and Gibbon came marching up the river on June 27, they found the slope a few miles downstream from Reno's Hill littered with bodies. Most had been stripped and scalped, and now lay naked and white under the glaring sun. In that scene of stillness and death, only one animate thing still moved. That was the horse Comanche.

Indians Butcher Soldiers

How Comanche's master Captain Keogh died, no one can say. The Sioux must have hit Custer's battalion with overwhelming numbers, cutting the troopers down like wheat before a scythe. From the positions in which the bodies were found, it is evident that only two companies held any semblance of formation. One was L company, commanded by Custer's brother-in-law, Lieutenant Calhoun. The other was Captain Keogh's I Company.

These two units appear to have taken the brunt of the first attack, and they took it like the soldiers they were. A rifle ball broke Captain Keogh's left leg, and a wound in Comanche's left side makes it look as if the ball passed through the officer's leg and into the horse's body. Keogh must have dismounted then and stood on his one good leg, clinging to Comanche, using the horse's body as a shield as he fought to the bitter end.

All of Comanche's wounds were on the same side, which must mean that the horse stood unflinchingly, though wounded, bleeding and weak, until the fatal bullet cut his master down.

Scouts Reach Battlefield

When Gibbon's advance scouts reached the scene, the horse stood in a shallow depression not far away from the body of his master. His coat was caked with blood. He had three severe wounds—one in the neck, another in the fore shoulder and a third in the hind quarter. In addition, he had numerous flesh wounds from which he had lost considerable blood. He was so weak that he was not even able to walk to the nearby river for water and his feverish eyes showed that he was afire with thirst.

An officer gave the order to shoot him and put him out of his misery, but a young lieutenant begged to be given a chance to save his life. The request was granted. An enlisted man went down to the river, filled his hat with water and brought it back to the horse. Comanche drank gratefully. After a while he gained enough strength to move upstream to where Reno's battalion lay nursing its wounds.

For several days it was doubtful that the horse would live. Then gradually his tremendous vitality made itself felt and he began to mend. Army surgeons cared for him as tenderly as they did the human wounded. The small river steamer *Far West* had pushed its way up the Big Horn River to that stream's junction with the Little Big Horn, and when the wounded were taken aboard Comanche was among them.

Rig Up Canvas Sling

A canvas sling was rigged up to support him during the long trip down the Big Horn, the Yellowstone and the Missouri back to Fort Lincoln. There, during the following year, he gradually regained his strength.

By the time the next spring came to Fort Lincoln, the tough, scarred veteran was as fit as ever. The Seventh Cavalry had a new commander now. Recruits were filtering in to replace the men who had died on the Little Big Horn. I Company, whose personnel had been wiped out to the last man, had been reformed. As the days became warmer, Comanche grew restless in his stall, eager to take his place in the regiment again.

Troops Honor Comanche

But that was not to be. The post commandant issued the following order:

Headquarters Seventh U. S. Cavalry,
Fort Abraham Lincoln,
Dakota Territory,
April 10, 1878
General Orders No. 7

1. The horse known as Comanche being the only living representative of the bloody tragedy of the Little Big Horn, his kind treatment and comfort should be a special pride and solicitude on the part of the Seventh Cavalry, to the end that his life may be prolonged to the utmost limit. Wounded and scarred as he is, his very silence speaks more eloquently than words of the desperate struggle against overwhelming numbers, of the hopeless conflict and of the heroic manner in which all went down on that fatal day.

2. The commanding officer of Company I will see that a special and comfortable stall is fitted up for him, and he will not be ridden by any person whatsoever under any circumstances, nor will he be put to any kind of work.

3. Hereafter upon all occasions of ceremony (of mounted regimental formation), Comanche, saddled, bridled, draped in mourning, and led by a mounted trooper of Company I, will be paraded with the regiment.

By Command of Colonel Sturgis.

The orders were carried out. During the remaining years of his life, Comanche went wherever the regiment went, a pet of all the men. His stall, his food, his comfort, were such as no other army horse before or since ever enjoyed.

Given Freedom of Post

He was given the freedom of the post. No mess hall ever refused him tid-bits. Officer and enlisted man alike pampered him with sweets. Now and then on cold days, a soldier would slip him a nip of whisky, and as the years passed he became something of a toper, looking forward each day to his toddy as an old man to his pipe, slippers and fireside.

In 1891, at the advanced age of 28, he died. The entire regiment mourned his passing. His body was stuffed and mounted and given to the University of Kansas, where it is now on exhibit at the Dykeman Museum.

The grand old fellow stands motionless, his coat marked with scars honorably earned in the service of his country, a symbol of an era that is past. Something about his attitude gives one the impression that he is waiting—patiently waiting and listening for a bugle call that will never come again.

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A JUST-SO MAN

Keith Deland knew what must be done when Bud Moreland rode into Prairie's End — and his life was forfeit for failure!

KEITH DELAND saw by the sun's peak that it was time for his mid-day tour of the mushrooming town that was Prairie's End, in western Kansas. He reached his gun-belt down from the wall peg and strapped it slackly on a hip, and went out into the channel of shack-rimmed dusk that was the principal thoroughfare of Prairie's End.

He twisted his head to look west at the blue outlines of the Rockies, the clear air conspiring to shorten the distance so that they rimmed in the fast-growing town that had become a mecca for the tenuous stream of wagon-trains moving ever Westward.

"To-morrow," he murmured, his young face grave with the trouble that was in him, "to-morrow, I turn in my star. Or next week, at the latest. This joke has already gone too far!"

He could take it all but the uncertainty and the unreality. A man has a right to be certain about things; and a man has a

By WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

right to feel that things around him are real. A real man has, anyway, and the town marshal of any frontier settlement should be a real man. Especially now that more and more people were heading west and pushing the frontier ahead of them. West from St. Louis on the Mississippi to Kansas City and St. Joe, on the Missouri. West past Independence Rock and lately, south through the country of the Cheyennes and onward through Prairie's End across Cherry Creek and into the Pike's Peak country.

The uncertainty of it was that somebody from those other days, the days that Keith Deland didn't like to think about, would take a second and closer look at the young, gangling, blond, curly-headed town marshal of Prairie's End and recognize him.

The unreality of it was that a former member of the notorious Moreland Boys of evil repute around Kansas City and St. Joseph, would be wearing a lawman's star.

CHANNING BALL, the huge, ruddy, jovial proprietor of the Rocky Mountain Inn, the rambling structure that had been the keystone of Prairie End's hazardous economy, had half-jokingly offered the job of marshal to the hollowed-eyed, emaciated, youngster who had come furtively in out of the night and identified himself merely as:

"Keith Deland. On the run. From—Injuns. Afeared they got the rest o' my party. If yuh got anything I can do while I wait for word—if there ever will be any—I'd appreciate it."

Channing Ball had winked solemnly at Ma Ball, his bustling and efficient wife, and said, "Reckon you can stand a feed, son, from the looks of you. And if you're any hand with a gun, why if I'm right, we're going to need a town marshal hereabouts. If I'm right, we're right spang in the middle of what will be a real town, some day."

Keith Deland had thought differently, which was why he was there at Prairie's End. There was no chance that any of the old crowd would come across him there. Or the unfortunate people who had become the objects of the Moreland Boys' professional attention.

"I judge my gun is as good as your town," Keith had grinned, telling the full truth of it. "Time you need a better one, I'll move over. Or onward."

Channing Ball had rumbled his deep laugh and clapped the road-thin younger man on the back. "A just-so man!" he had chuckled. "A just-so man, if ever I saw one! Eat up, son, and we'll get to the details later."

There never were any details, exactly. Channing Ball wasn't a man for details. He splashed his personality and his industry on a broad canvas and left details to lesser men. Nor were these lesser men long in coming, once the Pike's Peak Or Bust rush started, the rush that was to become Pike's Peak *And* Bust when the strike there was overstated.

But a curious miner had prodded his pick into the golden gravel of Cherry Creek, and Prairie's End led to Cherry Creek instead of to Pike's Peak.

Before a rehabilitated Keith Deland altogether realized it, his 'tours' of the town were just that, tours of the town, instead of a pleasant canter through the lush prairie-grass, a shawl of blue-misted mountain peaks fringing Keith's filled-out shoulders.

A blacksmith knocked together a shanty and set up his forge, and became Smith, The Smithy.

A trail-weary peddler threw up a shack and became Nelson's General Store.

A horse-trader built a corral and threw a roof over some stalls, and thus Gorman's Livery came into being.

A freighting-line sampled Ma Ball's back-home cooking and the C. O. C. & P. P. Company—the California Overland Central & Pike's Peak, which could grin at its nickname of 'Clean Outa Cash & Poor Pay'—set up a station there.

An Oriental found his determination harder than the water of the section, and opened a laundry.

A Greek snuggled a skillful skillet

under the eaves of the tolerant Channing Ball's Rocky Mountain Inn, and did a thriving quick-order business among Ball's overflow crowd.

A retired drunk, a just-started drunk, a Fargo-dealer, an itinerant preacher, an Irishman with a skill for organizing individuals into civic groups, and a wheelwright, settled down.

A wagon-load of petticoats arrived, and the Fargo-dealer had himself a dance-hall.

In a word, a town was born. Prairie's End.

"I'll be movin' along to-morrow. Or next week," Keith Deland decided, looking at the miracle of the town with disturbed eyes, then.

And then a dressmaker arrived and set up shop next to Nelson's Store, and the dressmaker, a Mrs. Ort, had a daughter, Mary. And Keith Deland found himself staying on.

REMEMBERING HIS boast to Ball that his gun was as good as the town, Keith started to practice up on markmanship, his own being strangely inept for a member of the gun-smart Moreland Boys.

"Got to keep my hand in," he told Channing Ball one day, when Prairie End's founder came upon him practicing on some of Nelson's discarded tins. Throwing them into the air, firing from the hip, either hand, missing; and trying it again. "I was rusty."

Ball had grinned his slow, warming grin, and chuckled his deep, warming chuckle. "A just-so man," he had said, as he often said to quiet, restless-eyed Keith. "A just-so man!"

Keith had frowned over that expression. He didn't push any questions to anyone, ever. Because he didn't want any pushed to him. More than once, he'd wondered if his imagination was playing tricks with him, or if he *had* seen Channing Ball before. Someplace. Back—then. At St. Joe, in those other days.

But he'd imagined that of other people he had seen, as they passed through Prairie's End on the way West to empire—or death. He supposed he would be imagining it the rest of his days, and when he supposed that, he would decide:

"I'm moving. To-morrow—or next week at the latest. I can't stand this uncertainty of waiting to be recognized. I can't stand this unreality of a Moreland Boy wearing the lawman's star. I got to move on!"

But it was the uncertainty and the unreality that held him, too. The uncertainty of where to go, what to do. For wouldn't he be as likely to meet up with someone he knew—one of the old gang—elsewhere?

And the unreality that held him was an unreal beauty that was at the same time real. The purple-sage slopes of the mountains. The sparkling, clear air. The incredibly beautiful sunsets, when you could see a west-sky that was as if a painter's palette had exploded on a ceiling of mother-of-pearl. Or the mountains wearing mantles of snowy ermine against a sky blue as Mary Ort's eyes, snowy mantles that shimmered in the sun and winked down at Prairie's End.

He sat on his horse, one dawning, and watched the early risers moving about in the knee-deep mist that carpeted the earth, so that they seemed to float in the air like angels with hard-used faces, and the ugly gables and spires and turrets of the town's buildings were like the turrets and spires of a fairyland city, and he told himself, "This is mine! This is my land, my people, my place, my work! This is mine!"

And then the uncertainty and the unreality of it settled on him again, like an iron shroud, and the care was back in his eyes when he guided Rocky on with a gentle rein.

"What does Chan Ball mean by *'A just-so man'?"* he pondered. "A man who does everything just so? Exactly, neatly, just-so? I wonder?"

But still he didn't ask. Nobody had asked of him anything, since that first day he had walked weakly into the Rocky Mountain Inn and showed, rather than ex-

pressed, his need for food. It was the custom of the new land. You didn't ask.

So when Chan Ball said, "A just-so man!" Keith Deland didn't ask, either.

"Tomorrow, or next week, I pull out," he told himself again. Later he saw the sun was at noon and his mid-day tour due, and he strapped on his brace of guns and forked up onto Rocky and turned him down the dusty street toward the new Lucky Strike Saloon, at the east end of town.

HE REINED over to let a man on a bay past; and then realized the man didn't want to pass. Nor to let Keith pass. Then the uncertainty and the unreality of the past two years were shattered in the one soft word the man spoke through his beard, the uncertainty and the unreality that Keith Deland thought he hadn't wanted, and now that it was gone wanted so desperately again.

"Key! *You,* Key? Well, switch mah britches ef ol' Key ain't gone an' made himself a lawman! Haaaaaaaaaw-haw! Say, Key, don't tell me you don't know me under mah face-brush? Bud Moreland that was? Bud Rogers that *is,* son! Well, now, Key, if this ain't real nice!"

The bearded man clapped a wary hand to the butt of his gun at Keith Deland's involuntary move. But he relaxed again, his lips juicy with the 'baccy he was chewing, and grinned wisely.

He couldn't know it, but Keith Deland's involuntary movement was an agonized reaching of his hand for what he'd had so long, and until now had thought he hadn't wanted. The uncertainty and the unreality. This was certainty and reality, here in the dusty road that was Prairie's End—and a dream's end.

Keith thought a swift moment about denying his identity. After all, the two years since he had fled St. Joe and the Moreland Boys and that gun-belching fight when the hold-up of the paymaster had gone wrong, had put weight on his lean frame, had brought a steady glint to his eye to replace the old, furtive, uncertain shiftiness they'd had, had put on him a quiet that hadn't been 'Key' Deland's.

But even as he thought of it, he made his decision. He had gone through a hell of uncertainty and unreality and indecision for two years, and now the powerful and ruthless outlaw, Bud Moreland, had freed him from that hell, even as he thrust him into a new one by his recognition.

"I know yuh now, Bud," he replied slowly, his eyes coolly appraising the other and wondering why it was he had held this outlaw in such awe, once. "Now that I look at yuh real close. I'm goin' to keep lookin' close until yuh haul freight, Bud. Get out of Prairie's End, and don't come back!"

The burly outlaw blinked his eyes in bright speculation a long moment, then he was grinning and chewing his cud again.

"I durn near got fooled," he chuckled. "I durn near figgered you were playin' lawman to the hilt! Figger to handle a haul o' yore own here, huh? Not by a long shot, Key. Why, I'll even fergit you run out on us that night in St. Joe, when things broke wrong an' we run to our hosses only to find 'em strayin' loose, and you gone! I'll even fergit that. *Maybe!*"

Keith turned his care-lined face up and down the road to see if anybody was watching him. "I didn't rightly know what you Morelands were about, that night," he murmured. "You'd taken me in and fed me, after that wagon-train I was with got jumped and wiped out by them Indians. I—I just went along on that ride, the night of the fight, to kind of repay you. You and Seth said it was just to get some cattle back that had been stole from you."

Bud watched Keith with steady eyes. "You lie! You had an idea, all right, son. Nobody was ever long around the Moreland Boys that he didn't know what was goin' on! Anyways, nobody would believe it if yuh told 'em otherwise."

Keith thought about it, wondering at his own calm as his new world crashed about his ears. "Reckon that's about right, Bud. Reckon I did know something

wrong was going on; but yuh'd helped me when I needed help, and there didn't seem anything really wrong in holding yore mounts for yuh. Besides, I was trying to figure something out."

Bud's keen, dark eyes slanted a look of inquiry at the younger man. "Like what?"

"Like how come you Morelands to have a few of the horses that had been with the shot-up, burned-out wagon-train," Keith said slowly. "That blaze-face with the slash-cut hoof; the bay with the nicked ear." He eyed the horse that Bud sat now. "*That* bay, Bud."

"Sort of hard to prove," the outlaw grinned. "Especially after two years o' keepin' shut about it. Not that you've the liver for it, nohow. Runnin' off soon as the trouble started!"

KEITH MURMURED, "I had to. Some men rode up on me before I knew it, an' one of 'em fired a flare that lit up the scene bright as day. I whipped the nearest horses, to stampede them, and broke for it. That way, yuh had at least a chance. Had I stayed and tried to shoot it out, yuh wouldn't have had *that* chance. As it was, I didn't know was I recognized or not."

"Real thoughtful," Bud Moreland drawled. "And then what did yuh do?"

"Hit up to Omaha for a spell. Set out on the Central Overland Trail with another wagon-train, as a bull-hand. Cut loose from it and headed for Pike's Peak. I'm here two years, now, almost."

Bud Moreland thought about it a silent moment, then nodded shortly. "Well—I'll fergit that run-out o' yores, Key. I'll make out like I believe what yuh say, which is more'n people would do if yuh didn't know the Moreland Boys was—well, sort o' being asked about in the law-circles. I'll fergit that, Key. On condition that yuh declare me in on this set-up yuh got here at Prairie's End."

Keith sighed his disappointment, but he wasn't surprised. He had seen the possibilities for too long now, to not have figured this: that one of the old gang would come across his trail, would see the ease of working a clean-out of the prosperous little trail-town with the help of the town's marshal.

Keith had thought about it so long that he had worked out plans for handling just about anything that came along.

He had worked out a story for possible recognition by those unknown men who had surprised him as he guarded the horses for the Moreland Boys that night of the gun-fight.

"My wagon-train had been wiped out. My uncle's wagon-train. I was lookin' for two horses so marked that I couldn't be wrong about it. You came up when I was with the horses; and I thought you was the outlaws, so I scattered 'em and ran—"

If two or more of the Moreland Boys had ever chanced to ride Prairie's End way, there wasn't even a story. There was but an act. "I'll get out," Keith had decided. "I'll get away, fast!"

There was a plan for *one* Moreland Boy showing up, too. Keith was ready now to put this into effect.

"Let's talk this over where nobody can study us doing it," Keith Deland murmured, as he reined Rocky clear and walked him away.

Bud Moreland followed after Keith, down past Chinee Chollie's on past Mary Ort's, past the new Palace Hotel, and angled down the alley between the Lucky Strike Saloon and Smith's Smithy.

There was a suspicious gleam in the outlaw's eyes when he pulled to a stop in the alley and quickly sized up the lay. The windowless sides of the buildings, and the high board fence at the end, made it a perfect spot for—anything. He flashed a look of hard inquiry at Keith and tugged at the reins to haul the bay back out of the dead-end. But Keith was past him with a scrape of his spurs on his own mount, and had him blocked in.

"This is it, Bud," he said, tensely. "You Moreland Boys always played it in a bunch, bully-fashion. You and Seth and yore other brother, Pete, and yore hangers-on. There was always more of

yuh than of the other people. Yore victims. Yuh should have kept it that way, Bud. I'm sorta surprised yuh didn't. But that's yore funeral, Bud. I don't know how or why yuh come along here alone. But I know this, yuh *ain't* going away again!"

The outlaw sat very still in his saddle, his gun hand easy on the pommel, and his eyes very busy with it all. Twice, his mouth tightened and pin-points of fire came into his eyes. But twice he noted the confident alertness of this broad-shouldered youngster who faced him, and he relaxed again each time.

"Now listen, Key—"

"Go for your gun!"

Bud Moreland's hand had been relaxing and drifting back along his right thigh, slowly, but it stopped now. A new inquiry came into his eyes, a question that framed it, silently.

"Just how good a gun-hand can a man get to be in two years?"

"Go for your gun!"

BUD'S plan died in his widened eyes. His hand got a firm grip on the pommel of his Mexican saddle. "Now, that's right unfriendly, Key," the bearded man complained. "The boys wouldn't believe this, even if I was to tell 'em, which I won't. They might not give up so easy as me. Me, I just thought yuh had you a nice set-up, here, and I wanted in. 'Course, ef yuh want to hawg it all to yoreself, that's yore business."

"Where are the others?" Keith asked, harshly.

Bud Moreland said blandly, "Now, I wouldn't know that. I ain't seen 'em myself since the bust-up of the gang, that night at St. Joe. That was a sheriff an' his posse that come along to surprise us. The sheriff an' some chance travellers the lawman had got together. They busted us high, wide an' handsome."

"You're a liar," Keith said flatly. "Yuh came ahead to scout the town. Like as not, they're back at Cheyenne Bend waiting for word should they work down this way, or stay to the Mormon Trail. I'll send word up that way to hunt 'em down, once I've settled with you. Go for yore gun!"

Bud Moreland shrugged his shoulders and murmured, "Then yuh got to kill me in cold blood, Key, 'cause I ain't goin for no gun. Not even if yuh wasn't armed would I go for my gun. After all, Key, I always liked yuh. It was me found yuh that time, and brought yuh in, son. But never mind all this, yuh just go ahead and kill me ef yuh think that's fair return for what I done for yuh! Go ahead and kill me."

Sweat broke out on Keith Deland's face, and a rage trembled his body in the saddle. This, he hadn't counted on. He had known the contempt the Moreland Boys held him in as a fighting man, even before he had run for it that night he was surprised guarding their horses.

Pete and Seth Moreland had inquired into the young derelict's shooting ability, and had guffawed their amusement when he had literally missed the side of a barn at fifty paces, with a heavy Forty-four. Even two weeks of work with the lad hadn't improved him much.

So Keith had counted on their ignorance of his acquired marksmanship, if ever he came across one of them, to goad them into a draw.

Bud Moreland was too sly, however. He read too much of confidence in the young lawman's manner and his invitation to go for his gun.

Keith waited, trying to talk himself into drawing and firing on this lone enemy. He could explain it all, afterward, if there ever had been a need of explaining why you shot at a Moreland!

"I sought to question him, and he went for his rod!" Keith could say.

Even if he didn't draw, Keith knew he had to get this man. The rest of the gang might be in town this very minute, might be spreading around to cover the various vantage points before they struck to kill the town's defenders, raid its stuffed coffers, and help themselves to what of whisky and women they wanted before they rode off with the wrecked

town on Prairie's End in their bloody wake.

"So much more the reason to kill this snake now," Keith told himself. "They *could* be here, but most likely they are waiting up the trail at Cheyenne Bend. That's their way of operating: if word comes back of a good thing, they hit it. If neither word *nor* scout comes back, they take the hint and stay away. And this scout of theirs, this Bud Moreland, ain't riding back!"

He reminded himself, now, of his suspicions of the Moreland Boys and his own ill-fated wagon-train near Kansas City, when a band of supposed "Indians" jumped it and massacred the pilgrims. It would have been impossible, perhaps, to prove it; and besides, it was popular to blame all acts of vandalism on the Indian.

He reminded himself of his uncertainty the last two years, of his mental torture as he struggled to lay the old ghost of that St. Joe night and to go on with his new-found life.

HE reminded himself that he had kept silent on more than one important subject, whenever he was with Mary Ort, and that more and more eligible young men were flooding into the territory, young men who wouldn't keep silent about either the past or their plans for the future. Plans that included a blue-eyed, pert, house-wifely girl like Mary Ort.

He reminded himself that even if he let Bud Moreland go now, it would be but to bring the gang down on his head at a later date, and they wouldn't come with holstered guns nor words of friendship, not for Keith nor for the townspeople who had come to respect and trust Keith Deland.

He reminded himself of all these things, as he sat facing Bud Moreland, and still he couldn't draw and shoot. Not unless Bud went for his gun first. And Bud, grinning gently now below shrewd, dark eyes, was too sure of living the way he was playing it to ever go for his gun, no matter how burning the rage for Keith that the outlaw choked back into his chest.

And Keith Deland couldn't shoot this man in cold blood. Nor could he take him in, even if he wanted to face out the accusations the man would hurl at the arresting lawman, accusations that would forever, perhaps, put Mary Ort beyond the reach of all his pent-up plans for the future.

With a growl of frustration, Keith nudged Rocky forward, his eyes very watchful, and leaned over to slide Bud's gun out of its holster.

"Get out!" he said tersely. "Get out, and don't come back! And if yuh know what's good for yuh, you won't come back with the other boys. I'll be watching for yuh, Bud. And I'll be sending word ahead to Cheyenne Bend to have a look-see around there for the Moreland Boys. Must be yuh got smoked out farther east. But yuh won't operate anywhere west, either, if I can help it. Get out!"

But Bud wasn't moving.

He twisted his head to look back at the board-fence that dead-ended the alley, and asked, "And have yuh shoot me in the back and make a get-away to 'discover' someone had shot me—like you never seen me before? Or hide behind there and *watch* them find me, *listen* to them find me, as you could do easy enough? Oh, no, friend! You go first! I ain't aiming to be dry-gulched even if I ain't armed. I'd just as soon yuh would shoot me here, as get me in the back as I ride out, like yuh want."

"Whichever," Keith said curtly, as he moved past the man. "But don't think I'm not meaning it when I tell yuh, and I'll send word ahead to Cheyenne Bend, too. Take my advice, Bud, and *get out!*"

The lawman moved his horse along the narrow strip and was turning into the dust-strip that was Main Street when his instinct warned him that something was wrong with the way he had done. An instinct, or a deadly, telltale *click*, as a single-action, easily-concealed derringer was thumb-cocked in that alley behind him.

He threw himself sidewise, his movement coming simultaneously with the sharp, loud crack of a pistol, and a slug burned the lobe of his right ear. He slid down Rocky's side, slapping the horse clear of the gun-play as he lit on his haunches, his feet gathered under him like a cat, and another and louder roar echoed in the alley.

Bud's horse bolted past, riderless, and Keith was staring at the tumbling form of the outlaw on the ground, trying to figure it all out, when the rolling form brought up with a bang against the wall of the dance-hall and a hand came up and the tiny, but lethal, barrel of the derringer the man had had concealed on him, sought a bead on Keith's body.

The lawman's gun came out fast and roared deafeningly as he palmed the hammer, his forefinger holding the trigger of the rim-fire, five-shooter down.

Bud Moreland bucked convulsively twice, then lay back against the wall of the dance-hall, cursing in a weak, surprised monotone.

"A nice trap, Key, a nice trap!" the gunman slowed it to say. "I figgered yuh didn't know about my boot-derringer, not knowin' yuh had a dep'ty planted behind that there board-fence. He cut down on me when I fired, and the hoss bolted to throw me and finish the job!"

Shouts were coming from the street. Doors were slamming, feet were pounding along the board-walks. But Keith wasn't paying attention to anything but the big man who was climbing the board fence, was dropping down into the alley, his eyes bright and a hard grin on his broad, ruddy face.

"Mister Ball!" Keith breathed. His eyes left the man to search out the knothole in the fence, and then swung back to the proprietor of The Rocky Mountain Inn. "How long—"

Channing Ball chuckled and said, "I marked this ranny from the time he hit town, earlier. I got a good eye for faces, even faces behind beards, Keith. I got a good memory, too. I marked him for someone I knew about, and not in a good way. So when you angled in here with him, I sort of snuck up to the fence so's I could sit in on the deal.

"I sort of think I saw him back around St. Joe, a little over two years back. It was a night a sheriff pressed me into his posse an' we rode out after a gang o' outlaws. But this one—he'll never ride no more, *Key*. That was a nice piece o' shootin' you did, once you set your mind to it."

THE young lawman flushed, but his eyes were steady. "Well, now yuh know. I—I guess I should have talked, long before this."

Channing Ball nodded, "Yeah. Now I know. And I don't know nothing I didn't sort of know right along. About your talkin'—there's a time to talk, and a time to keep your face shut tight. The time to talk is past. You talked straight and to the point when the time came. With your gun, the way a lawman has a right to talk." He grinned widely.

"Like I said, you're a 'just-so' man, son. Out here in th' West, a man is just so bad as he has to be, an' just so good as he dares to be. To-day, you were a little better than you had a right to be. But still, you're a just-so man. Well, here's the citizens to shake the paw o' their rootin'-tootin' marshal for saving them from the Moreland Boys. And there's some sort of word you got to send on to Cheyenne Bend, right?"

"Yeah," Keith Deland nodded. But he was thinking about Mary Ort. "And something else, when I get time."

"Just so," Chan Ball chuckled. "And I know you'll do it all like the just-so man you are."

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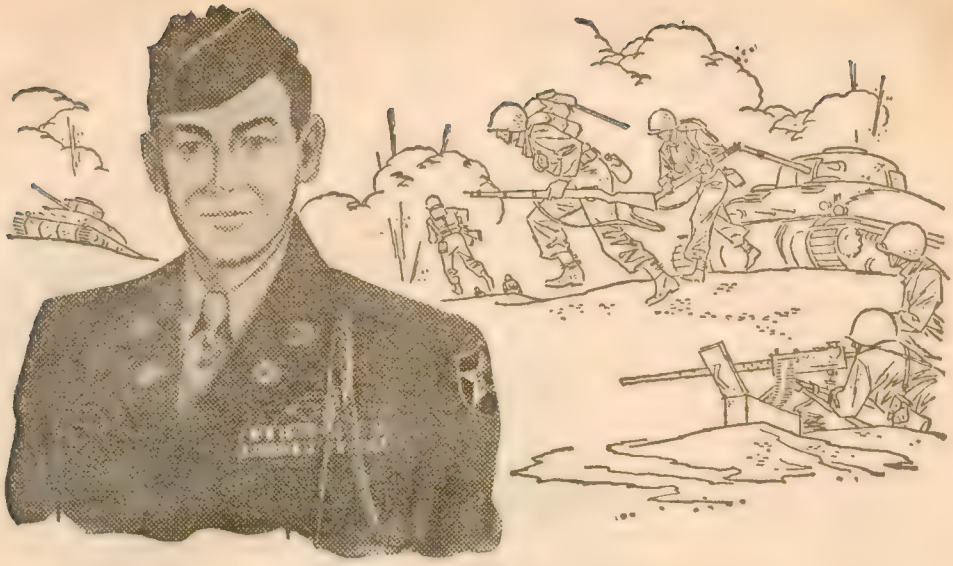
COMING NEXT ISSUE

ATROCITIES

An Indian-Fighting Story by MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON



Are you man enough to wear this?

MEN of the Second Infantry Division—the famous "Indian Head" Division—can hold their heads high in any company of fighters. For this division is entitled to wear the famous Fourragere of the Croix de Guerre.

They won that honor in France in 1917 and 1918. For their combat record in World War II, they were awarded a dozen unit citations. Landing in Normandy June 7, 1944, the Second fought at St. Laurent sur Mer and liberated Trevieres. It captured Hill 192 in the vital struggle for St. Lo. It took Tinchebray, then swung south 300 miles to Brest, which surrendered in September. A month later the Second was biting into the Siegfried Line, and in January, 1945, it was in the thick of the Battle of the Bulge. Two key German towns, Monschau and Ahrweller, were taken in February and March, and by V-E Day the division had driven all the way to Czechoslovakia.

It takes real men to measure up to the standards of a great fighting outfit like this. They've got to be hard, alert, skilled in the use of many weapons. For the ground combat soldier is the most important man in America's defense. He is the keen cutting edge of the military machine.

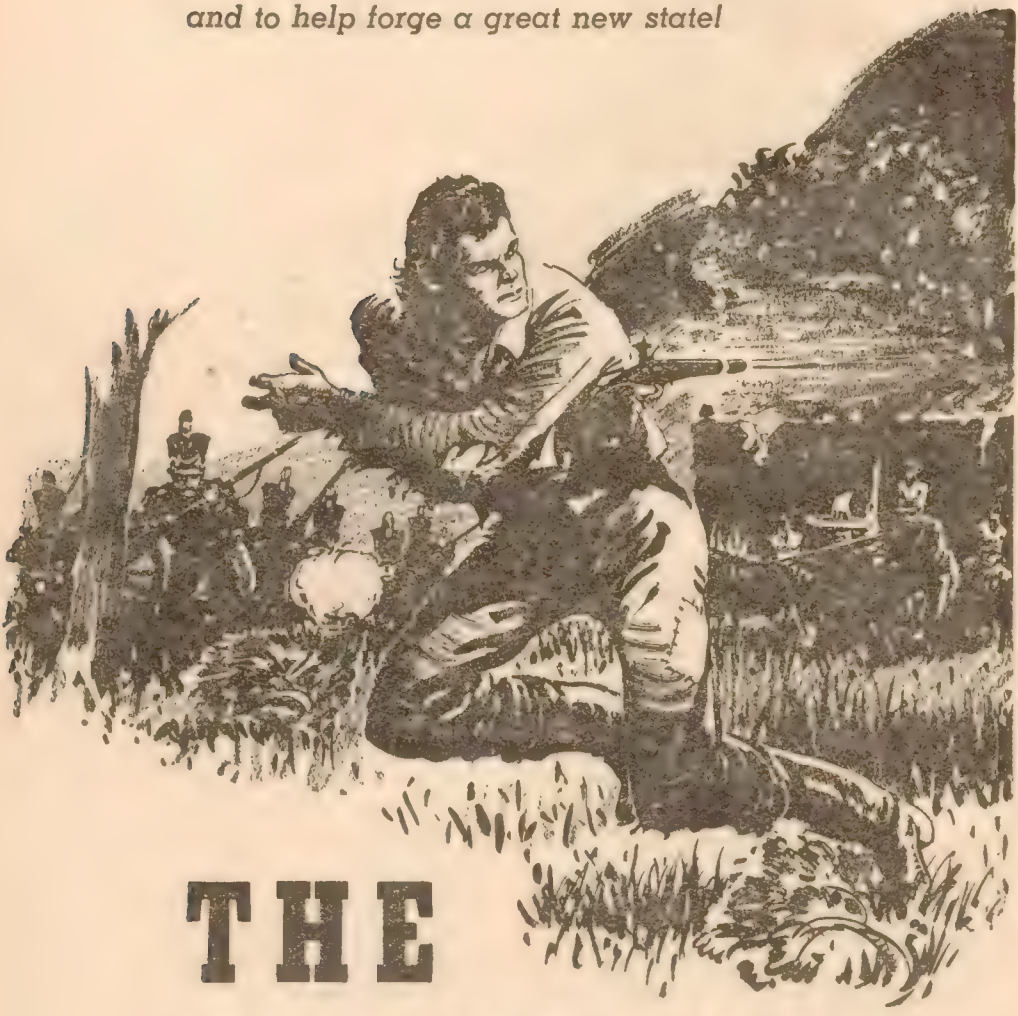
If you like action—pride of achievement—the comradeship of a great group of men—there's a place for you now in the Second Infantry Division. YOU can wear the Indian Head insignia and the green cord of the Fourragere! Qualified men, 18 to 34, can enlist directly into this great outfit for 3 years or more. Get full details at your nearest U. S. Army and U. S. Air Force Recruiting Station.

CAREERS WITH A FUTURE

U. S. Army and U. S. Air Force

Beginning: **AN EPIC NOVEL**

Lee Stuart had a twofold purpose—to kill a man, and to help forge a great new state!



THE FIGHTING TEXICANS

OF THE ALAMO

by LARRY HARRIS

CHAPTER I

Death Patrol

HE LAY on a cot in a chapel chamber of the ancient, thick-walled church-fortress of the Alamo, dying of typhoid-pneumonia, and the man-servant with him stared in horrible fascination, smelling the repugnant scent of death.

"Water," the dying man said weakly.

The Negro fetched a gourd and held it to his lips, lifting the sick man's head so he could drink his fill. From outside in the clear, cold night, came the mighty

rumble of cannonading as Santa Anna's artillery opened up again from the old plaza. Grape and canister beat heavily against the walls of the compound. The earth shook and the lighter blast of musketry added to the rising crescendo of din.

In the chamber the flame of a burning taper danced erratically to the concussions. The dismal light cast shadows upon the sick man's bearded face. Pain lay

LEE STUART

deep in his feverish eyes, but deeper still was mirrored the tragedy—the curse and hurt and agony that only a strong man can experience—and often never alleviate. The specter of death was not new to him. He had seen it the day his wife and two children had died of the plague.

He shut his ears to the roar of battle outside, as for years he had dulled the ache in his heart with whiskey. On a table beside his cot were his two cap-and-ball pistols, and his beloved bowie knife. A ghostly smile tugged at his dry lips.

"When the end comes," he said, "you'll keep them reloaded for me, George."

"I'll keep them reloaded," the Negro promised.

Across the room from them, the wife of a lieutenant sat watching and listening, as she held her year-old baby on her lap. In the candle light her delicate features were pale. She had quieted her fretful child; she had closed her eyes in silent prayer. Her calm was a spiritual solace, lifting her above the sordidness of death.

She moved across the room. Her skirts made a rustling whisper of sound. At the foot of the cot she stopped, forcing a smile as she gazed down into the eyes of the dying man.

"You are a brave man, Jim Bowie," she murmured.

"I have tried to be a good Texan, Missus Dickenson."

She said prophetically, "Texas will never forget you."

TOUGH, impulsive, reckless James Bowie—recently called by Sam Houston the biggest, bravest man in Texas—grinned. Indian fighter, soldier, scout, he had cussed with unalloyed invective the disease that had robbed his great body of strength. For years he had spit in the devil's eye by advocating Texas independence.

"No help yet from Jim Fannin?" he asked.

"Jim Bonham rode in with word this afternoon from Goliad. Jim Fannin and his men are not coming."

When Jim Bowie closed his eyes in sleep, Mrs. Dickenson turned to the Negro, and her lips trembled.

"Get word to Colonel Travis that the end is near."

George quietly opened the chapel door and stepped outside into the bitter cold night. Ahead of him, the portal opening into the huge compound showed vaguely in the weird light of tiny camp-fires. He made for it at a run, barely noticing the dim figures of the defenders crouching behind the breastworks facing south.

Fiery Turmoil is Born the Star of Empire!

Just inside the vast arena the Negro paused, awed and frightened by the sight that met his eyes. Here in this high-walled arena, almost two hundred yards long and half as wide, men stood on crude wooden scaffolds, their muskets pointed over the walls. Behind parapets men crouched. On platforms, strategically placed, dim figures stooped behind the cannon.

A dozen small camp-fires burned inside the main arena. From the cattle pen to the east came the restless stir of the dwindling herd. Along the west wall some of the barrack room windows were yellow with candle light. At a hole in the south wall Davy Crockett and his men were tense shadows, waiting for attack, saving the scant supply of ammunition for their eighteen pound cannon.

Except for the occasional thump of a sniper's musket, the sounds of battle waned. Near one of the camp-fires, a wounded Texan sat wearily on a buffalo robe. With cold-stiffened fingers he pulled a large time-piece from his pocket.

"Ten o'clock!" he called so the men on the parapet above him could hear.

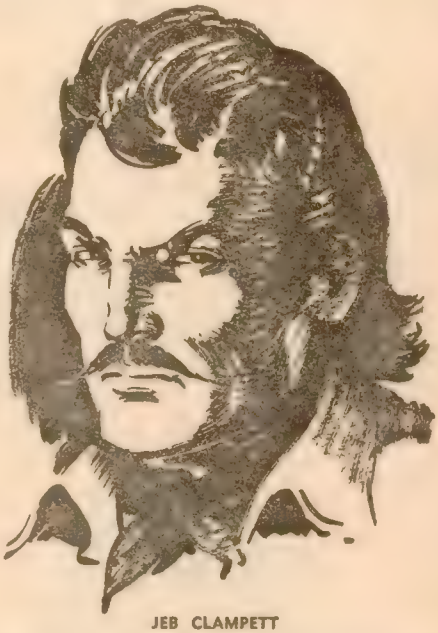
From an artillery emplacement in the broken north wall, a tall young man of military bearing strode through the shadows toward the barracks. He wore a colonel's uniform of the regular army which was frayed, dirty and torn, but nothing material could detract from the majesty of this inspired man of destiny.

In his small barracks room he sat down at a crude table, fingering through some papers. The candle light touched the sensitive features of the twenty-seven-year-old commander. His eyes, bloodshot from fatigue and exposure, moved again over the message he had written nine days ago.

Commandancy of the Alamo
Bexar, Feby. 24th, 1836

To the People of Texas and All Americans in the world—

Fellow Citizens and Compatriots: I am besieged with a thousand or more of the Mexicans under Santa Anna. I have sustained a continual Bombardment and cannonade for 24 hours and have not lost a man. The enemy has demanded a surrender at discretion, otherwise the garrison are to be put to the sword, if the fort is taken. I have answered the demand with a cannon shot, and our flag still waves proudly from the walls. *I shall never surrender or retreat.* Then, I call upon you in the name of Liberty, of patriotism, and every thing dear to the American character, to come to our aid with



JEB CLAMPETT

all dispatch. The enemy is receiving reinforcements daily and will no doubt increase to three or four thousand in four or five days. If this call is neglected, I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible and die like a soldier who never forgets what is due his own honor and that of his country.

VICTORY or DEATH.

William Barrett Travis
Lt. Col. Comdt.

P.S. The Lord is on our side. When the enemy appeared in sight we had not three bushels of corn. We have since found in deserted houses 80 to 90 bushels and got into the walls 20 or 30 head of beeves.

Travis

At a sound in the doorway, Colonel Travis turned to see his Negro body-servant standing there.

"Missus Dickenson told me to come, suh," the Negro said agitatedly. "Suh, Mistuh Bowie is dyin'."

Colonel Travis murmured thanks for the message and walked out into the arena, heading for the south wall. From the shadows of the cannon emplacement stepped a huge figure in buckskin and coonskin cap. Powder flask and bullet pouch were slung across his wide shoulders. In the crook of his arm was his long-barreled musket.

"Anything new, Crockett?" Colonel Travis asked quietly.

DAVY CROCKETT spat a stream of tobacco juice off to one side.

"It's Cos' men there to the south, Colonel. Santa Anna is bunchin' his men in the west plaza, across the river. They've got troops in the Old Mill north of us and in the ditches to the east. They've got us plumb surrounded now."

"How many men would you judge the enemy had?"

"Five or six thousand."

MOLLY ODELL

"And we have one hundred and eighty-two."

Davy Crockett's eyes burned in his drawn face.

"Jim Fannin ain't comin' with help, Colonel. That means it's just us boys to the end. We got one chance in a thousand—"

"The ammunition dump?"

"That's it, Colonel. The Mexicans' powder house is yonder across that field about a thousand yards. There's a Mex battery just this side of it. But, shucks, I'll tackle it. If we could blow that powder house they'd be left high an' dry. I can belly-crawl out there—"

"Call the men together, Crockett!" Colonel Travis replied.

Big Davy Crockett moved hurriedly through the shadows next to the high wall, speaking quietly to the men. Down from their platforms they climbed: mostly boys in their early twenties, youths with sunken cheeks and hollow eyes. They were starved and exhausted. For twelve hellish days and nights they had withstood a terrible bombardment.

They lined up—men who were to write a blood-red page of heroism in Texas history. Shivering from the cold, too tired for words, they watched in grim silence as the cot bearing Jim Bowie was carried outside the chapel. He was lying on his back, staring up at the cold, glimmering stars.

Colonel Travis spoke. "I would be failing in my duty as your commander, if I did not point out to you that our situation is without all hope—except in the rare sense that a few determined men may sometimes fuse the fire of their spirits, the strength of their arms and bodies, into a force that is indomitable.

"Many of you are husbands; many, as I am, are fathers. I do not therefore propose to hold you here against your will. For those of you who care to try it, escape is still thoroughly possible. Our couriers have passed through the Mexican lines with impunity. If you are careful, you can get through too.

"I think I should tell you however, that

the Mexicans will never enter this fortress without encountering resistance. I have decided that whatever your various decisions may be, I shall remain.

"Now, to simplify matters, I shall draw a line in the earth with my sword. I will ask those who wish to stay with me, if any should, to cross this line. Those not wishing to make that commitment are free to leave at once."

For seconds no man moved. Facing them stood Colonel Travis, strangely calm, unafraid, as he dedicated his life to his cherished ideals of a free Texas. Each man there knew death was certain, but in the sanctity of the moment they were experiencing a deep and almost religious communion with the men who had died before them.

God, they felt, was with them, and this was their destiny.

Out of the hush came the voice of Jim Bowie, the man every Texas fighter had learned to love and respect.

"Some of you boys set my bed across that line," he said weakly.

Two men stepped forward to move his cot across the line. Then a hundred and eighty men moved as one across the line in the dirt. Sick, wounded, half-frozen men, their ideals transcended all physical hurts.

At the end of the line, big, buckskin-garbed Davy Crockett let out a whoop and broke into song. It broke the tension of that strange drama and some of the men laughed at his clowning. On the cot the emaciated ghost who had once been Jim Bowie, grinned.

"George!" he called hoarsely. "Blast your hide, where are you, George?"

The Negro hurried up to the side of the bed. "Here I is, Col'nuh Bowie. Here I is, suh."

"Help tote me in out of the night air, George," Bowie chided. "It ain't good for my lungs."

COLONEL TRAVIS again called his men to attention.

"Boys," he said grimly, "the enemy's powder is in that old shack about one thousand yards southeast of us, across the open field. If that were blown up it might mean the difference between defeat and victory for us. Such a mission involves the greatest risks, perhaps death. I need two volunteers. Are you ready?"

"Any of us regulars are ready, Colonel Travis!" Lieutenant Dickenson spoke up proudly.

"My Tennessee boys is always ready, Colonel," Davy Crockett said in his bull-like voice.

"I'll choose the two men then," Colonel Travis replied.

HIS gaze swept the long line of be-draggled Texas defenders.

"Lee Stuart!" he called.

A tall, rawboned youth of twenty-two stepped forward, saluting. His dirty, torn homespun jeans were stuffed into the tops of shoddy, cheap boots. An old, brush-scarred cowhide jacket was the only outer clothing that protected him from the bitter cold.

He wore no hat, and his curly brown hair was long. At his hip was pouched a cap-and-ball pistol, and a bullet bag hung from his belt.

"Ready and willing, sir!" he said levelly.

There was dignity to this youth, a tough, rawhide quality that hinted of strength. This vast, wild, tangled brush country was his home. In the depths of his blue eyes was an unvoiced story of bitterness and hardship.

Colonel Travis smiled. "Thank you, Stuart."

Then he glanced at another man and said, "Jeb Clampett."

A burly six-footer stepped forward. In the dim glow of the camp-fires his grizzled, square-jawed face was yellowish. He was dressed in much the same fashion as Lee Stuart, but his clothing was of better quality.

He was a man who was once given to swagger and loud talk, but during the past week of bombardment he had become dourly silent. Never popular among the other soldiers, this black-haired, black-eyed man was considered dangerous in a

ruckus, a shrewd gambler and a hard drinker.

"I'm ready, Colonel," he said, almost eagerly.

"You and Lee Stuart will prepare to go over the wall immediately, Clampett," Travis said. "Fuses will be given to each of you. The odds are all against your ever coming back here alive. But God go with you!"

As the men broke ranks, Lee Stuart and Jeb Clampett followed Lieutenant Dickenson into the barracks. Each of them was handed an oil-soaked fuse and given final instructions. Then Lee Stuart hurried across the compound to the chapel. He nodded to the woman with the baby in her arms, and walked up to the cot where Jim Bowie lay.

THERE was a tight, hard knot in Lee Stuart's throat, but he forced a grin.

"I'm going over the wall, Jim," he said softly.

The liquid stare of death was in Bowie's eyes.

"George told me, Lee," he whispered. "Jeb Clampett's goin' with you."

"Colonel Travis chose him, Jim."

"There's a puny chance of you comin' back, Lee. But if you do, an' live through this ruckus, give my regards to your pa an' all the rest of the folks in San Mateo Valley.

"I will, Jim."

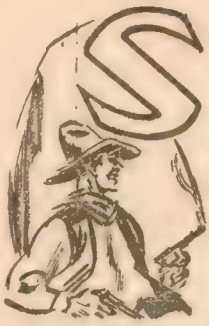
"An', Lee, watch out for Clampett. There's no need of me tellin' you what kind of a man he is. I wouldn't trust him as far as you could throw a Nueces bull by the tail. I guess he was chosen because he's s'posed to be tough." Jim Bowie lifted an emaciated hand. "Good huntin', son. An' *vaya con Dios.*"

Lee Stuart took the fevered hand in his own, too full for words. He felt as though steel fingers were tearing his heart out as he straightened. His right hand rose in smart salute, and Jim Bowie's hand lifted in weak return. The sick man's eyes were misty.

"The eyes of Texas are upon you, son," he murmured.

CHAPTER II

Over the Wall



STUART strode outside, his jaws clamped against the terrible ache inside him. He hurried to the south end of the compound where most of the men had congregated. Jeb Clampett was waiting for him, his eyes glowing queerly in the darkness.

"Let's go, Stuart," he growled, "before the Mexicans start shooting again."

A dozen men slapped Stuart on the back, wishing him luck. Then strong arms lifted him up the wall. On top his fingers dug into a crack in the mortar and he quickly swung his legs astride. Momentarily he hesitated, breath bated, eyes stabbing the encircling black night. Then he swung down by his arms and dropped.

He hit the ground hard, breath gusting from his lungs. At his back he heard the scuffing sound of Clampett coming over the wall behind him. Then the big man dropped, hit the ground with a loud thump, grunting and cursing under his breath. He crawled up beside Stuart, and in the darkness his eyes gleamed like those of a coyote on the prowl.

Stuart whispered tensely. "This is one time we're going to forget the troubles between us, Clampett. One of us has got to get through. Keep your pistol ready. But don't shoot unless you have to. Ready, gambling man?"

"Lead on, you two-bit brush-popper."

Stuart felt his heart hammering in his throat as he began crawling away from the wall. Prior to the siege he had made forays over town, searching for much-needed supplies. It was risky business even then—before most of the civilians had fled in advance of Santa Anna's onrushing army. Now he knew it was worse.

General Santa Anna, chafing at the defeat handed his men at Gonzales, was out

The bullwhip struck Clampett across his naked back (CHAP. III)

for the blood of the *Tejas* traitors, and quick victory. News of the convention held in Washington-on-the-Brazos, declaring Texas a Republic, had reached him. In a storm of rage he cursed the name of Sam Houston; he belittled the name of David G. Burnet, the newly elected, fiery president of the make-shift Republic, who carried a Bible in one pocket and a pistol in the other.

From captured Mexicans, Lee Stuart had heard of Santa Anna's ravings. Eliciting the powers of his newly-won presidency of Mexico, the proud, cultured little Latin tossed off his cloak of dignity and demanded the blood of all Texans. He

strutted before his well-equipped army; he scoffed at the efforts of the rag-tag army of Texans; he prattled for vengeance.

What chance, he cried, did those uncouth *Tejanos* have against his smartly-groomed dragoons, against his dashing cavalry? Against the crack battalions of Toluca and Los Zapadores, commanded by General Castrillion? Against the highly-touted infantry regiment, commanded by General Perfecto Cos, the presidente's own brother-in-law?

Lee Stuart's mind raced as he crawled forward. From across the river, in old San Antonio de Bexar, came the blood-chilling whisper of moving men. Out of the darkness filtered the sound of hoof-beats, the muffled rattle of artillery wheels, the clash of gear.

Sharp rocks cut Stuart's hands and knees. Ahead of him, as in a nightmare, he spotted the dim outline of the Mexican jacals. Shadows churned beyond them. Off to the left, he knew, was the enemy battery. Behind that was the powder house, half hidden behind some breastworks.

In the shadow of the first jacal Stuart flattened, every nerve in his body screaming from the tension. Jeb Clampett fell beside him. Stuart glanced back, chilled by the sight of a Mexican patrol creeping through the darkness not twenty feet away.

When the shady figures had merged into the black night Stuart turned his face toward his companion, motioning for him to follow. Inch by inch, Stuart circled the deserted shack. From the nearby Mexican battery came the whispers of the *soldados.* The flat, hard ground telegraphed the sound of marching feet. From the direction of the winding, narrow river came a splashing sound as the encircling Mexicans crept closer.

ONCE past the gun battery, Stuart breathed easier. Not a hundred feet away the powder house stood, dim shape behind its earthen breastworks. In the inky darkness, a sentry paced back and forth in front of the building.

Stuart knew their only chance of success lay in quietly subduing the guard. Once their fuses were connected to the powder kegs and lighted, their biggest risk would be in trying to make it back to the Alamo before the earth-jarring explosion.

Jeb Clampett came up beside him.

Stuart whispered, "Coming up from behind the guard is our only chance, Clampett. We'll use our pistol barrels on him—"

He stopped then, shocked by what he saw on Clampett's shadowy face. The big man was trembling, not from the cold alone. His voice was a husky croak of elation.

"Not me, Stuart. We're through the Mex lines now. I'm heading out of Bexar while my hide's still whole. The Mexes will kill every man back in the Alamo before they're finished. Go ahead, you young fool, and try to blow up the powder house, but I'm getting out of here. I've been waiting for this chance."

Rage ripped through Stuart like a stream of fire.

"Clampett, you can't—!"

"Watch me!" the big man chortled, and started forward.

Cold sweat suddenly bathed Stuart's face. The pistol in his fist was leveled out in front of him.

"Clampett!" he cried fiercely. "You dirty—traitor—!"

Jeb Clampett leaped to his feet, driven by some wild mania to gain his freedom. The sentry whirled, his startled shout piercing the night hush. Then the rifle jerked to his shoulder and roared.

Stuart hurtled to his feet as gunfire and the pound of boots blended with the turmoil of the aroused Mexican camp. Disregarding all danger, he plunged headlong toward the powder house, firing at the sentry as he ran. Then out of the night, straight toward him, came a dozen or more Mexican soldiers, yelling and shooting as they ran.

"Gringos!" rose the hue and cry. *"Gringos!"*

Stuart spun and turned back, zig-zag-

ging in a hail of bullets as he sprinted toward the river. It seemed that the enemy was coming at him from all directions. But by some quirk of luck he broke free, and as pursuit dogged his heels he sought the scant protection of the cottonwood trees that flanked the narrow river.

With a splash he hit the stream, wading and swimming, then stumbled up through the cattails on the opposite side. Breath tore past his lips in great gulps as he fell flat in the mud. Across the stream from him, fifty feet away, Mexican soldiers ran up and down the bank, hunting their quarry like a pack of dogs.

Ahead of Stuart the plaza echoed with shouts and confusion. In the belfry of the ancient San Fernando church, headquarters of Santa Anna and his staff officers, a Mexican tolled the great bell, spreading the alarm. Soldiers, held too long in restraint by Santa Anna's cautious maneuvers, gave vent to their spleen by firing their muskets into the air and shouting. In front of the church the long line of cannon boomed forth another volley at the Alamo, four hundred yards away.

The earth shook beneath Stuart. Lifting his head, he spotted the bivouacs of the Mexicans beyond the 'dobes of the town. The plaza, alight with store windows and small campfires, was a beehive of activity. Stuart knew it would be just a matter of minutes until the enemy would be searching every foot of the river bank.

Cautiously he started forward, bent low, staying in the black shadows of the cottonwood trees as much as possible. He had lost his pistol in crossing the river. His clothes, dripping wet and muddy, seemed already to be freezing fast to his body.

Like bitter gall in Stuart's mouth was the knowledge that he had failed in his mission. He had no idea of what had happened to Jeb Clampett. He'd had the notion all along that deep inside Clampett there was a cowardly streak; but tonight when that cowardly streak had come out in the man, it had jarred Stuart like a physical blow.

WITH little hope for his own salvation, Stuart headed for the flat-roofed 'dobe store buildings that ringed San Antonio de Bexar's main plaza. On two different forays in the past fortnight he had sought temporary refuge in a cantina near the river bank. Here he had been welcomed by an Irishman and his twenty-year-old daughter.

Fighting, red-headed "Red Mike" Odell had scoffed at the warning to evacuate the town in advance of Santa Anna's troops. Though loyal to Texas, he was not a member of the War Party. For once in his stormy life he had advocated peace. He was one of perhaps a dozen store-keepers who had kept his place open, scorning the threat of death, laughing uproariously as shells landed near his saloon.

"An' who, me bye," he had bellowed good-naturedly at Stuart, "is to be tellin' Red Mike Odell what to do? By the Hivinly Saints, I fought for Santa Anna against Bustamente three years ago. Me heart is with Texas for shure, but I'm having' no hand in this war. An' Santa Anna knows it. I'm keepin' me doors open to them who have the coin for drinks, Mex or *Tejano*. No harm will come to me or me darlin' Molly. . . ."

And Red Mike Odell had stayed, keeping his doors open, suffering no molestation from the Mexican horde.

Now Lee Stuart made his bid for safety on boldness alone. He made straight for Red Mike Odell's cantina, circling far around the Mexican batteries. Each second he expected the rattle of muskets, the horrible smash of lead into his body.

Cannonading, shouts and musket fire still filled the night with bedlam as he came up to the rear door of the cantina. A sliver of yellow light seeped out from beneath the plank portal. From inside came no sound. Stuart glanced back, every nerve in his body keyed to explosive pitch. Churning shadows, obviously Mexican soldiers in pursuit, came toward him from the direction of the river bank.

Stuart's hand lifted the door latch. Quickly he stepped inside, closing the portal at his back. Across the small barroom

from him, near the front doorway, Molly Odell stood watching the activity in the plaza.

Stuart said, "Molly!"

She turned, one hand crushing her lips. "Lee! Lee, what are you doing here?"

She came towards him, staring at him through the guttering candle light, her dark blue eyes wide in her dead-white face. Consternation gave way to fear in her, for the tale of escape and pursuit was plain in the wet and mud-smeared figure that faced her.

He stood like a doomed man, watching the girl, his ears throbbing with the din of gun-fire outside.

"I didn't know where else to come, Molly," he said.

"They'll find you here, Lee!" she cried.

"I reckon I'd best get out, Molly. I don't want to get you in trouble."

"No, Lee! Stay here. You can't go outside. They're all around the place. They'll kill you, Lee. I'll find someplace for you to hide. I'll find a place—"

She was a little hysterical, trying desperately to hold back her sobs. He couldn't remain where he was, Stuart knew. Soldiers were running along the dark street in front. With a second glance any of them could see him through the window or the open door. Yet he made no move; he suddenly felt tired and sick of it all.

"Where is your father, Molly?" he asked.

He was looking down at her, watching the candlelight gleam in her Irish red hair. She had a short little nose and eyes set too far apart to be really beautiful. But there was a quality of loveliness about this lithe-bodied girl, a hoydenish spunk and vivacity that made men look twice. She had seen the raw and sordid side of life in this wild frontier town without becoming a part of it. Her wholesomeness was like the clean, fresh air of an early Texas dawn.

TONIGHT, as usual, she was wearing moccasins, a riding skirt and a jacket of doeskin. Suddenly she hurried to the front door and peered out. She had a grip on her emotions when she came back to Stuart. She was still pale as death, but she was more her old self, quick-witted and unafraid.

"There's a door yonder at the end of the bar, Lee. It's a small store-room where Dad keeps supplies. Get in there, quickly! Whatever happens, don't say a word. I'll stand at the bar and tell you what's happening. Hurry, Lee!"

She fairly shoved him to the door and inside. And there in the Stygian blackness of the room, Stuart heard Molly Odell's voice, tight with strain.

"Dad left last night, Lee, heading for Goliad to get help. He couldn't stay out of the fight any longer. When he learned that Santa Anna intended to slaughter every man in the Alamo, he went hog wild. If the Mexicans knew he'd gone for help they'd waylay him and nail his hide to the San Fernando belfry. And they'd probably nail me to the cross for a spitfire traitor.

"I'm scared, Lee. For the first time in my life I'm scared sick. I wanted to go with Dad, but he figured it would be best if I stayed behind and covered up for him. Some Mexican officers were in here most of the day, drinking. They didn't ask a word about Dad, and I kept shooting the tequila to them, hoping they wouldn't. They're tired of waiting for the attack. My guess is they'll strike within the next twenty-four hours. Why are you outside, Lee?"

"I had a job to do, Molly. Colonel Travis—"

Stuart's words broke off as Molly Odell suddenly began singing an old Irish ditty. Behind the thin panel, he heard the clump of boots and the rattle of sabers. Then a demanding voice in Spanish came clearly.

"Where are you hiding the *Tejano* from us, *Senorita?*"

Molly Odell laughed, and her voice was high-pitched.

"Why, *Lugarteniente!*" she retorted in Spanish. "You startled me. What in the name of the holy Saint Maria do you mean—hiding a *Tejano* from you? Are you not still slightly addled from the te-

quila of this afternoon?"

"This is no jesting matter, *Senorita.* In war there is no jest. Since when did you and your father turn partisan to the Texas rebellion? I demand that you speak the truth instantly!"

"And since when," Molly said caustically, "did you start warring against lone women? I demand that you leave this minute!"

The man's voice was harsh with threat.

"Not without the *Tejano, Senorita.* Men of my Dragoon company saw him enter here by a rear door only moments ago. Shall I have my men tear down the place in search, or will you concede to my demands peacefully?"

In her anger Molly cried in English, "Get out, the whole pack and caboodle of you! Lay a hand on me and I'll shoot! I'll shoot—!"

Molly's scream was lost in the blast of a pistol shot, the scuffling sounds of bodies and pound of running feet. Then Stuart yanked open the door that shielded him. He stood there, straight and tall, his eyes alone revealing the burning passions that roweled him. His voice came flat and deadly.

"I am your prisoner," he said in Spanish. "Leave the lady alone, Lieutenant."

The smartly uniformed Dragoons in the barroom came toward him, the bayonets on their long-barreled muskets glinting in the candle light. Behind them, still clutching Molly Odell's wrists, a Mexican officer turned, smiling coldly. He snatched the smoking pistol from her hand and tossed it disdainfully behind the bar.

"You will come with us, *Tejano!*" he said.

Stuart stepped forward under the light jab of bayonets, ignoring the drunken triumph of the laughing *soldados.* There was no fear in him; only the agony of failure.

Molly Odell leaned back weakly against the wall. There was something almost pitiful in her silent stare. Her eyes were for Stuart alone, and the hurt in her stung Stuart like a bullet wound. Her jacket was torn near the neck as a result of the brief struggle.

"Lee!" she whispered. "I'm sorry, Lee."

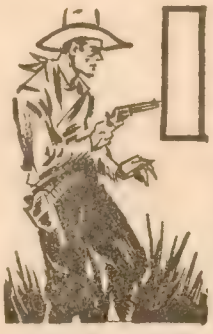
He stood before her, ignoring the grinning troopers, certain that the end had come. He watched her straighten and her lips tremble while tears filled her eyes. From deep reservoirs of her being she was finding strength, as courageous women have found it since the beginning of time.

He said, "Goodby, Molly. I'm obliged to you for all you've done. If there is still time, get out. Get out before it is too late."

Then he turned and walked out the door, trying to shut from his ears Molly Odell's sobbing cries as she called his name.

CHAPTER III

Traitor



IN a rear chamber of old San Fernando Church, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, *presidente* of Mexico, Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Operations, paced the puncheon floor in deep agitation.

Small of stature, immaculately garbed in polished boots and brass-buttoned grey uniform, he made a striking figure. His raven-black hair and eyes were in strange contrast to the pallor of his skin. As a budding young militarist, he had been sent by the Spanish Crown to subdue the Mexican revolutionist General Iturbide, and halt Mexico's trend toward independence.

General Santa Anna had defeated Iturbide; but avidly alert to his own interests, he had betrayed the Crown, smashed a few other uprisings and begun maneuvering for his own dictatorship. Like an animated gargoyle he had, for years, pranced through the Halls of Montezuma, an opportunist of the Gods, winning support by

his grandiose scheme of Mexican continental supremacy.

His eyes, bright with a zealot's dream of power, his voice, cultured and forceful, his Napoleonic swagger and suave deception, all were qualities that charmed the Army clique, the aristocratic *hacendados,* and the barefoot peons in the field to his side. And out of the char and ash of misery and revolution, he had been swept into power.

This glory-seeking poseur was not actually a military strategist; yet the army was the back-bone of his power. Months ago, when the Texans had begun rebelling against his tyranny, he had scoffed at their preposterous tree-to-tree style of fighting. He had sent troops under General Martin Perfecto Cos, a beloved kinsman, to retrieve the cannon in the brushwood town of Gonzales. A handful of Texans, their jaunty grins an insult to Mexican dignity, hoisted a flag over the town—a flag that bore the words: COME AND GET IT!

The Mexicans came, but they failed to get the cannon. Instead, General Cos and his men suffered tremendous losses, scattered like quail and never went back. Santa Anna, hearing of this galling defeat, had begun his march on San Antonio de Bexar, fuming for vengeance, honor, and the blood of the Texas rebels.

Now, torn with military indecision, he paused in full stride to glare at the group of staff officers.

"But what of General Fannin?" he cried angrily. "And this brazen bull of a man, Don Samuel Houston? Where are they and their forces? What, if in attacking the Alamo now, we should be trapped by them?"

General Cos murmured, "Perhaps we should wait—"

"Bah!" Santa Anna stormed. "Wait and be called fools by a world that watches with bated breath the strategy of the great Santa Anna? At times you bray like an ass, Perfecto. Other times you run like a rabbit!"

General Cos winced. "Perhaps then—"

"Bah!" s h o u t e d Santa Anna. He whirled, face livid with rage, as a man stepped into the doorway and saluted. "Yes, Pancho Frias," he demanded, "what do you want?"

Pancho Frias wore coarsely woven charro pants and the cowhide *zapatos* of the peon. His leather jacket had Indian trimmings and beadwork. Tall and muscular, he had the high cheek bones, the swarthy skin and the straight black hair of a Comanche. Cruelty was stamped upon his flat-nosed face. Of mixed bloods, he was known as a tough, dangerous character along the Border.

Santa Anna, ignoring the man's wild, unkempt appearance, had used him as a scout to good advantage. The looting and crimes committed by Pancho Frias were frowned upon but never mentioned as was the smell of his unwashed body.

"What do you want, Pancho Frias?" Santa Anna repeated irritatedly.

The breed's black eyes gleamed. "Lieutenant Porras," he said in Spanish, "has just come into the courtyard with another prisoner, your excellency."

"And what has that to do with this conference?"

"I overheard your talk, *Senor Presidente.* Much information might be had by getting these Texans to talk. Then we might learn the number of defenders in the Alamo. Also the whereabouts of the other Texas troops."

SANTA ANNA'S face lighted.

"A good idea, Frias—one that occurred to me at the same instant. Escort one of the *Tejano* prisoners here immediately."

Pancho Frias turned and walked outside into the high-walled patio where several lesser officers hovered around a small camp-fire. In the conference Santa Anna resumed his pacing, pausing occasionally to listen to the desultory gunfire outside.

Then from the patio came the clump of booted feet on the flagstone. As the door swung wide, a Dragoon lieutenant and two of his men jerked the prisoner to an upright position, facing Santa Anna

and his tribunal. The Texan's hands were bound with rawhide behind his back. His garments were plastered to his body with mud and water. In the doorway behind him stood Pancho Frias, his dark face wreathed in a mirthless grin.

Santa Anna glared at the prisoner, his hate suddenly charging the room.

"What is your name, *Tejano*?" he snapped.

"Lee Stuart."

"Regular or volunteer?"

"One of Jim Bowie's volunteers."

Santa Anna, a man of many moods, smiled.

"Why are you fools," he demanded, "so stupid as to rebel at my dictates?"

Stuart rapped, "Why does any man fight for liberty, Santa Anna? It is you who is stupid! Texas is no longer a part of Mexico. And your kind of tyranny is ended."

"You hate Mexicans, don't you?" Santa Anna sneered.

"I do not. I only hate what *you* stand for—and so will the whole of Mexico some day."

Santa Anna's face darkened. "What you think of me is of no consequence, *gringo!* I am the saviour of Mexico, and you are my prisoner. From you I demand some information. Answer me truthfully and your lot will be easier. How many men does the *Comandante* Travis have in the Alamo?"

"Enough to keep you worried, Santa Anna."

"How many?"

"I told you."

"Are reinforcements on their way?"

"I'm not saying."

"You refuse to talk?"

Stuart said in English, "Santa Anna, you know where you can go!"

The little Mexican commander trembled with fury. He looked as if he were about to explode when Pancho Frias spoke up.

"I can make him talk, your Excellency. I have a way of making such gringo fools gladly tell all they know."

"Then he is your prisoner, Frias!" Santa Anna cried in a fit of fury. "Get the truth out of him. I must know instantly. And for the insult he paid me, make him suffer!"

Stuart went cold all over, but outwardly he was calm as they dragged him outside. It took four of the soldiers to untie his hands and hold him in the ensuing struggle. But once overpowered, he was dragged to the patio wall and his wrists lashed to a heavy iron hook that protruded from the wall higher than his head.

PANCHO FRIAS wound thick strands of rawhide around his booted ankles. In the pale light of the camp-fire, Stuart caught a glimpse of Santa Anna and his staff watching from the shadows of the church wall. He made no sound as Frias slit the jacket from his back with a sharp dagger, then ripped his underwear down to the waist.

"You'll talk, gringo!" the breed grinned wolfishly. "I never seen a man yet I couldn't break!"

Stuart held back the burning hate inside him. He barely felt the frigid cold. He lifted his eyes to the starlit heavens, praying he could stand the torture like a man. He thought of Jim Bowie—of home and the girl he had left behind. Then at the sound of a familiar voice his head jerked around.

Several soldiers were half-carrying another prisoner toward the wall. It was big Jeb Clampett, who was cursing and struggling futilely with his captors. When he espied Stuart he let go a tortured bellow of surprise and fear.

"They got us, Stuart! Now what are they fixing to do?"

"Take it easy, Clampett!" Stuart gritted. "Get a tail-holt on that traitorous tongue of yours and say nothing! We wouldn't be here if you'd had any man in you!"

The big *gringo* was screaming hoarsely as they tied him up to another ring in the wall, ten feet from Stuart. As Pancho Frias stripped him to the waist, Jeb Clampett cried out for mercy, knowing what was coming now.

Revulsion filled Stuart, driving back the horror that ate into his vitals. He saw one of the soldiers hand Frias a bullwhip. He saw the soldiers step back as the breed moved closer; he saw the wild terror in Clampett's eyes, and he knew that the big Texan was yellow.

Stuart cried out hoarsely, "Take it like a man, Clampett! For the sake of the men in the Alamo, tell them nothing!"

Like the hiss of a striking rattler the plaited bullwhip lashed out, striking Clampett a cruel blow across his naked back. The big man wilted, wrenching at the bonds that held him. His pain-filled scream echoed into the night. As the grinning breed drew back the whip again, Clampett's knees sagged. He was suddenly a whipped, craven thing, whining, sobbing.

"Don't hit—me again! I'll talk! I'll tell you anything you want to know. Just don't kill me—"

"He broke easy," Frias chuckled, turning to one of the soldiers.

Stuart raged, cursing Clampett wildly and tearing at his bonds. Something went dead inside him as he watched them release Clampett and drag him away. When Frias returned he still carried his whip. Back in the shadows of the church Santa Anna and his staff officers were dim figures, watching. In the glow of the campfire Pancho Frias' red eyes burned with killer's lust.

"Ready to talk, gringo?" he rasped.

"You heard what I told Santa Anna!" Stuart gritted. "The same goes for you—you dirty—"

Cursing, Pancho Frias lashed out with the whip, his tall, hard-muscled body bending with the blow. And pain, unlike anything he had ever known, seared through Stuart's entire body like a molten stream of fire. The sinewy muscles in his broad, wedge-shaped back quivered as blood crawled down to his waist. He jerked rigid, his eyes shut tight and his jaws clamped as the hissing, cracking whip struck again and again.

Waves of agony rolled through him, but he uttered no outcry. His back, cut in a dozen places, was a bloody smear. By sheer force of iron will he clung to consciousness as the night rocked redly around him. As if in a horrible nightmare he heard the ugly hissing of the whip, the grunts and enraged curses of the breed.

Stuart felt his knees buckle and the swirling black shadows closed in around him. His body was one vast, terrible hurt. In a stupor of engulfing pain his head slumped forward upon his chest as human endurance could stand no more.

In the shadows of the church, Santa Anna looked like a man deathly sick. He went back inside the church, followed by the other officers.

"*Madre de Dios*, what are some of these *Tejanos* made of—steel and rawhide?" he croaked. "Even though an enemy, I must salute him as a brave man. Tell that foul-smelling breed to stop it. Hear me? Tell him to stop it!"

One of the officers rushed out into the patio, putting a halt to Pancho Frias' death-blows. The breed's rage-distorted face was wet with sweat. He was panting, his lips pulled back over his teeth like a frothing, mad lobo.

"His Excellency says that is enough, Frias!" the officer fairly screamed. "Take him away! Is the smell of blood driving you mad? It is a brave man you have beaten tonight, Frias. A much braver one than you will ever be."

"Bah!" sneered Frias. "You have the stomach of an old woman. I promise I'll still make him talk!"

THROUGH a haze Stuart heard them talking, but nothing they said made sense. More dead than alive, he sagged limply, hanging by his wrists from the iron ring in the wall. When the breed roughly untied him he tried to stand on his feet, but his strength was gone.

He remembered little of being dragged out of the patio by Frias and another man. In a small 'dobe hut adjoining the church wall he was tossed to the floor. The two men left then, closing the plank door at their backs.

Then Pancho Frias hurried through the darkness to another small shack where Jeb Clampett was held prisoner. A soldier was on guard in front. Frias muttered an order to the soldier, then went inside.

It was a small room, used once as sleeping quarters for one of the church padres. A candle, standing in a niche in the wall, afforded the only light. In one corner Jeb Clampett sat on a post-oak bunk, his head in his hands. He glanced up at the intrusion, and the wild look of fear again flooded his black eyes. The candlelight fell upon his naked, trembling torso.

"I'll talk, Frias," he said hoarsely.

The breed grinned contemptuously. "How'd you know my name?"

"I heard you talkin' with the guard. Then I remembered hearin' your name before. I heard of you before I ever got tangled up in this blasted war."

"Where you from, Clampett?"

"Cook's Crossing on the Nueces River, a hundred miles west of San Antone. In Mateo Valley."

"Run a gamblin' place an' saloon there, didn't you?"

Clampett breathed easier. "That's right. How did you know?"

"I *sabe* a lot of things, feller. San Mateo is one of the best, richest valleys in the Brasada."

Clampett got to his feet, trembling from head to foot.

"Frias, help me get out of here. You talk my language. I'll make it right with you. I've got my hide full of this fighting. Mexico can have Texas so far as I'm concerned. . . ."

His plea tumbled out, and the coward in him was plain to see. As he talked the breed listened, his bloodshot eyes glowing with speculation. Clampett didn't say he knew the name of Pancho Frias as a cutthroat renegade, whose bloody raids upon scattered Texas ranchers had earned him the name of "The Border Butcher."

"Help me, Frias!" he cried fervently.

The breed sneered, "I would if I thought I could trust you. An' you had any sand."

"You can trust me, Frias. Give me half a chance an' I'll prove to you I can be tough!"

Pancho Frias opened the door and peered out. The guard was out of hearing distance. When the breed turned, his swarthy features were hard. There was a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"I may be able to use you, Clampett," he muttered. "Play my game an' you'll have gold coins in your jeans. One wrong move ag'in me an' I'll slit your big throat from ear to ear. I'm not one to be fooled with, mister. Santa Anna hates me in his girlish craw, but he knows I'm the best scout in his army. So he lets me do as I please. When I do a little lootin' he turns his head.

"I'm not a *gringo* lover, Clampett, even though my mother was part white. I'm mostly Comanche, an' proud of it. The Comanches learned me how to hate. You Texans are dumb fools, tryin' to fight Mexico. You haven't got any army. I always play with a winner, Clampett. That's one reason why I'm on the Mexican side. You're on the losin' side, missin' out on all the money there's to be made out of this war. How'd you like to hit it rich, Clampett?"

"I'd like it," the big Texan said, swallowing.

Pancho Frias grinned. "Maybe we can work out a deal," he said slowly.

They talked for several minutes, while outside in the late night the cannon stood silent. Starlight glimmered down upon the white walls of the 'dobe town where once twenty-five hundred souls had lived in peace. Wind soughed gently through the cottonwood and poplar trees, like the sighs of the men who would die in the blood-red dawn.

WHEN Pancho Frias left the shack he made straight for the church chamber where Santa Anna and his officers were still in conference. The breed's face was bland, masking the treachery and cunning that was part of him.

"The gringo has talked, Your Excellency," he said softly.

"Information of worth?"

"Of much worth, Senor *Presidente*! There are but one hundred and eighty-two Texans inside the Alamo, and most of them are sick from exposure and lack of food! No reinforcements are coming. It is the time to strike!"

Santa Anna's face paled. "You accept the gringo's babbling as the truth, Frias?"

The breed smiled. "A suffering man, close to death, speaks truthfully, Your Excellency. The Texan you thought was a brave man had but the courage of a mouse when I confronted him alone."

"But the large man called Clampett—"

"Forgive me, *Senor Presidente*. When the time came to talk the large man called Clampett uttered not a sound. It was the one called Lee Stuart who finally revealed the information we wanted."

"I find it surprising," Santa Anna murmured. "The *Tejano* Lee Stuart seemed a man of much courage."

"His courage was ice that melts into water, *Senor Presidente*. Lee Stuart turned traitor to his own people."

"Enough of this babble then, Frias!" Santa Anna barked. He whirled on his officers, voice rising with excitement. "Stand not with your mouths open, men! Now is the time to strike. Pass the word along to your sleepy subordinates. We strike just before dawn. Take not a single prisoner! Put the sword to every *gringo* rebel! Kill as you go! *Viva Mexico*!"

CHAPTER IV

Death At Dawn

ON the floor of his prison hut, Lee Stuart lay with his face in the dirt. There were moments when he was vaguely aware of muted man-made sounds outside; when his reeling, shocked senses grasped all that had happened. Then there were times when the excruciating pain was too much and he drifted into a coma.

He had lost all sense of time when he finally awoke. He bit his lips until the blood came to keep from moaning. Shivering and half-frozen, he crawled slowly to his hands and knees. In the heavy darkness he spotted a small window in the wall. There were thick iron bars in the aperture that Stuart reached for as he dragged himself to his feet.

Shaky and sick, he stood there, trying to shut out all memories of the horrible ordeal he had been through. He knew the dawn was not far off. The stars had faded, and like a ghostly shroud of death, a ground-fog had settled over the stricken town. He listened, spine crawling, as the stealthy tread of moving men reached his ears. Slowly turning cannon wheels crunched in the packed dirt.

Soft and eerie, those sounds rode the whispering breeze; sounds that chilled Stuart with an impending sense of disaster. The attack was coming! Men and gear were moving, creeping closer to the Alamo. Toward the river they moved, Mexicans in mass formation, hundreds of them. From the plaza came the muffled clop of horses' hoofs, the rattle of sabers, the creak of leather. That would be General Sesma's cavalry moving into position.

Men were marching, shivering with cold and fear, converging at the river, wading through the icy waters, their muskets and powder pokes held above the muddy flow. Men watched the heavens, whispering their last Ave Maria. Men marched with fear in their hearts, for this was war, and men die in war.

And like a huge tomb, the high, thick walls of the Alamo loomed up in the nebulous haze, ominously dark and silent. The great chapel windows stared out into the night like the eyes of dead men. And men with life still in their bodies, watched and waited. Waited to kill and be killed.

We strike just before dawn. Take not a single prisoner! Put the sword to every gringo rebel! Kill as you go! Viva Mexico!

Those sounds shook Stuart to the

depths of his soul, blinding him to his own physical agony. He felt the insane urge to scream a warning, but his voice would not carry to the Alamo. With both hands he gripped the iron bars of the window, cursing his own helplessness, cursing the name of Jeb Clampett to everlasting torment.

Stuart knew now that Jeb Clampett had disclosed the information that prompted this attack. Clampett, the coward, the traitor, had whimpered and begged that his own rotten life be saved—had sold out the lives of his comrades.

In that moment of great emotion, Stuart's lips moved in whispered prayer.

"Help them in the Alamo, God. Give them the power to fight back—to fight back—and win—"

He stopped short, a furtive sound beneath the window stabbing into his consciousness. Then in the gloom, on the opposite side of the bars, a person's head and shoulders took shape. It was Molly Odell, her face deathly pale in the darkness. In a breathless whisper she called to him.

"Here's a pistol, Lee! I heard about what you've been through. Are you all right, Lee? Are you all right?"

The courage and loyalty of this brave girl shot a thrill through Stuart.

"I'm still hanging and rattling, Molly! Run now while you've got a chance!"

"The guard is over yonder by the patio wall—asleep, I think. But don't take chances, Lee. They're attacking any minute now. There's Mexican soldiers everywhere, thousands of them. It's the end, Lee. Your door is latched from the outside. Wait—"

SHE vanished and the tiny clicking sound of a lifting latch guided Stuart through the inky darkness of the shack to the portal. Pistol in hand, he pulled the plank door ajar and stepped outside. Molly uttered a low, stricken cry when she saw his naked, blood-smeared torso. He reeled slightly, struggling against the nausea.

"I'm all right, Molly. We've got to make a run for it. If we can reach the Goliad road there's still a chance I can get help here in time."

"No, Lee. There is nothing you can do now. Please listen to me. We've got to separate. I know where I can get a couple of horses. Head for the cantina. You'll find some of Dad's old clothes in a closet there behind the bar, and some salve for that back of yours. Climb up on the roof. They'll never think of looking there. *And wait for me!*"

She slipped out of his reach, dodging around the corner of the shack and losing herself in the blackness that precedes the dawn. For seconds Stuart paused, the sounds of Santa Anna's army throbbing in his ears. Yonder against the patio wall he espied the dim outline of a crouched man, patently the soldier who had been left behind to guard the shack.

Cold sweat oozed from Stuart's body as he crept toward the figure. He clutched the leveled pistol in one fist. Each quiet step wracked his body with pain. The weakness in him mounted to panic. Ten feet from the soldier he paused. The soldier's head hung forward on his chest, his uniform cap awry; across his knees lay a musket.

Stuart moved closer. The guard roused just as he struck. The pistol in Stuart's fist flashed up, then down. There was a dull thump as steel met bone and the Mexican toppled inertly. Then Stuart worked quickly, stripping the man of his uniform, gritting his teeth against the agony of his lacerated back as he swiftly changed clothes.

In the cap and uniform of a Mexican foot soldier, Stuart stuffed the pistol into his belt and headed for the plaza. There were no lights to guide him, but he got his bearings and turned toward Red Mike Odell's cantina. Off to his left he heard the stamp and whinny of the cavalry horses. Out of the darkness all around him came the muted undertone of men's voices.

Beneath the poplar trees in the ancient park a figure suddenly took shape out of the gloom near him. Stuart took a long

chance and saluted, barely discerning the uniform of a cavalry officer.

"Death to the *gringos*!" he said in Spanish.

The officer rasped, "Why are you here, *soldado*? Who is your commander?"

Stuart froze. "General Cos, *Capitan*! I was detained—"

"To the river with you then, laggard!" the officer rebuked. "General Cos and his infantry are forming at the river. *Andale*!"

"A million pardons, *Capitan*," Stuart murmured, and hurried on.

He reached the long line of 'dobe buildings fronting the east side of the plaza, turned down a narrow lane between them, then ran across the open space toward the cantina. His heart beat wildly, for the darkness and fog were lifting. Ahead of him, along the river bank, the Mexican soldiers lay in mass formation, like hundreds of ants, waiting for the signal of death.

And in that moment of horror Stuart no longer felt the searing, biting pain of his own body. In front of the cantina he saw a man's body dangling by a rope from one of the protruding *vegas*. The man's clothes had been ripped to shreds. His head was twisted grotesquely from the knotted rope around his neck. And Stuart knew then that Red Mike Odell had failed in his ride for help.

THE Mexicans had captured Red Mike Odell and hanged him. The front windows of the cantina were smashed, the door in splinters. Inside Stuart found the bar wrecked, the floor littered with broken bottles and glass. He hurried through the room, stumbling out the rear door. Then with strength born of desperation, he leaped up to a low *vega*, flung a leg over and pulled himself to the roof-top.

He fell over the 'dobe false-front to the flat sod roof three feet below. There he lay, weak and spent, retching from exhaustion. Presently through dimming consciousness he heard it; the pound of running feet, shouted commands in Spanish, the cries and screams from a thousand throats, weird, inhuman, unreal.

Death had rung its signal bell, and out of the sudden pandemonium and din echoed the peal of the bell in old San Fernando church. Out of the tumult of blasting muskets and the roar of cannon came the blare of a Mexican military band in the plaza, striking up the blood-curdling *Deguello*—the song of death and battle, used by the Spaniards for centuries when they slaughtered their enemies.

Like a mortally wounded animal, Stuart crawled to the edge of the roof, lifting his head above the parapet. He stared as if transfixed, stunned by the horrible scene that would forever be burned into his memory. A stricken cry broke from him; he cursed in helpless, white-faced fury while tears filled his eyes and streamed down his cheeks.

In the dust and din of early dawn, in that carnage where Mexicans, like a crazed lobo pack, trampled over their comrades in a mass formation charge, human life was cheap. Mexicans with axes, crowbars and scaling ladders were up to the Alamo walls. From the north, south and east charged the infantry in a mighty flood—straight into the face of the Texan's withering fire.

But no cannon, no walls, no human force could halt the swarming, seething tide of men gone mad. They screamed and died, but others came on, and the anguished cries and sobs were not heard. At the rear came the cavalry, sabers flashing, horses rearing as nearer the flaming inferno of death they charged.

High over the Alamo the tri-colored flag of Texas waved, its stripes of red, white and blue greeting the bloody dawn. At the torn corner in the wall Davy Crockett and his boys were giving everything they had, clubbing with their rifle butts, emptying their pistols. This was the end; but Texas would live on. Not a foot did they retreat.

Hollow-eyed boys, the butts of their rifles wet with blood, facing their destiny of death with a curse on their lips, fought like maniacs. One hundred and eighty

against the horde of six thousand. Boys from the brush country, from Tennessee and the hills of Georgia. Texans all! Shooting from the ground where they lay with bayonets through them as more Mexicans came on and on, slipping and falling on the ground made slick by blood.

Davy Crockett was done, his bull voice silenced forever. Travis lay with a bullet hole in his head. Inside the chapel a woman crouched, shutting her eyes to the carnage, clutching her baby to her. A Negro hovered beside her, and they were praying, while the bedridden Jim Bowie emptied his pistols at the Mexicans who swarmed in through the door. He was smiling when they lifted him off the bed with their bayonets poked through his body. God had been good to him. He had let Jim Bowie die fighting.

The band in the plaza still played its dirge. From a staff on the belfry of San Fernando church waved Santa Anna's red flag. It was the color of the blood of those who had died. Inside the Alamo lay the Texans, one hundred and eighty of them, all dead—but nothing yielded. In seventy-five minutes of battle they had killed over six hundred Mexicans.

STUART was never conscious of the sun peeking over the brush-dotted hills to the east. His head was slumped forward against the parapet, his eyes closed. Death was not new to him, but the horrible spectacle he had witnessed left him shaken to the depths of his soul.

He was wretchedly sick and giddy. The throbbing agony of his cut and bleeding back was more than some men could have endured. But the hate in Stuart transcended all physical pain. A man can warm himself at the fire of hate. It can eat into his brain like an insidious disease and turn him into a killer. It can crawl through his veins like a poison.

Lee Stuart was experiencing one of the bitterest moments of his life. When he finally roused, he stared out of eyes that showed the horror and hurt; stared as the victorious Mexicans lowered the Texas flag and hoisted one of their own.

"I'll live to see the Texas flag fly there again!" Stuart's bloodless lips were twisted into a snarl. "I'll live, Jeb Clampett, to kill you and know that your soul has burned forever. Those men died in that church because of you. . . ."

He did not know that he was shouting it aloud.

In the early morning sunlight the Mexicans fetched high-wheeled *carretas* and hauled their dead away. Dust rose in the chill, cold sky as the living scurried about caring for the dead. Out the door of the Alamo chapel the Mexicans began dragging the bodies of the dead Texans, piling them like cordwood in the open field.

A group of officers on horses wheeled up nearby. Stuart recognized one of the men as Santa Anna. They went inside and were gone for several minutes. When they came back out of the chapel some of the soldiers in the group were escorting Mrs. Dickenson, who was still clutching her baby to her, sobbing hysterically. Beside her trudged the old Negro body servant. They were the only living survivors of the massacre.

Two saddled horses were summoned. The woman and her child were lifted into the saddle on one horse, the Negro on another. Santa Anna stepped forward, smiling wryly. He patted the head of the whimpering baby. Then he stepped back, doffing his hat and bowing gracefully.

"An armed escort will ride with you out to *El Camino Real, senora.* When you meet with General Houston, tender him my regards, and say that death awaits all Texas rebels. You might disclose to him that one of his traitorous Texas soldiers revealed information that made this victory of mine possible. He might, possibly, be interested in knowing the Texan's name was Lee Stuart."

Mrs. Dickenson, her clothing soiled with dirt and blood, stared out of stricken, tear-filled eyes.

"Lee Stuart," she whispered dully. "Lee Stuart."

A cavalry detail rode with her towards the edge of town. Stuart had no way of knowing what the conversation was about.

When the last Texan was dragged from the Alamo onto the pile, the bodies were soaked with oil. Sticks and splintered boards were stacked around the gruesome heap.

The flames that leaped from that human pyre rose heavenward, like fiery arms, begging supplication for the sins of man. The wind caught the smoke and billowed it against the bullet-pocked walls of the Alamo, and the stench was revolting.

As if in a stupor, Stuart heard the sound of slow-moving horses at the rear of the cantina. He heard his name called in guarded tones. At the edge of the roof he peered down and saw Molly Odell riding one horse and leading another. She was wearing a heavy grey Mexican army coat and an old sombrero. If she was surprised to find Stuart wearing a Mexican soldier's uniform she gave no sign.

"We've got one chance in fifty of getting out of town alive, Lee," she said queerly. "Ready to try it?"

He climbed over the wall to a *vega*, then dropped into the saddle. The pistol was stuffed into the waist-band of his jeans.

His face was the color of a corpse.

"All the uproar is in our favor, Molly. Come on. We've got to get out. I can't die now. I've got a job to do—a man to kill—"

They struck out for the timbered river bank, making no effort to hurry, for they knew they were being watched. By their very audacity they hoped for escape. It was a long gamble and the odds were all against them.

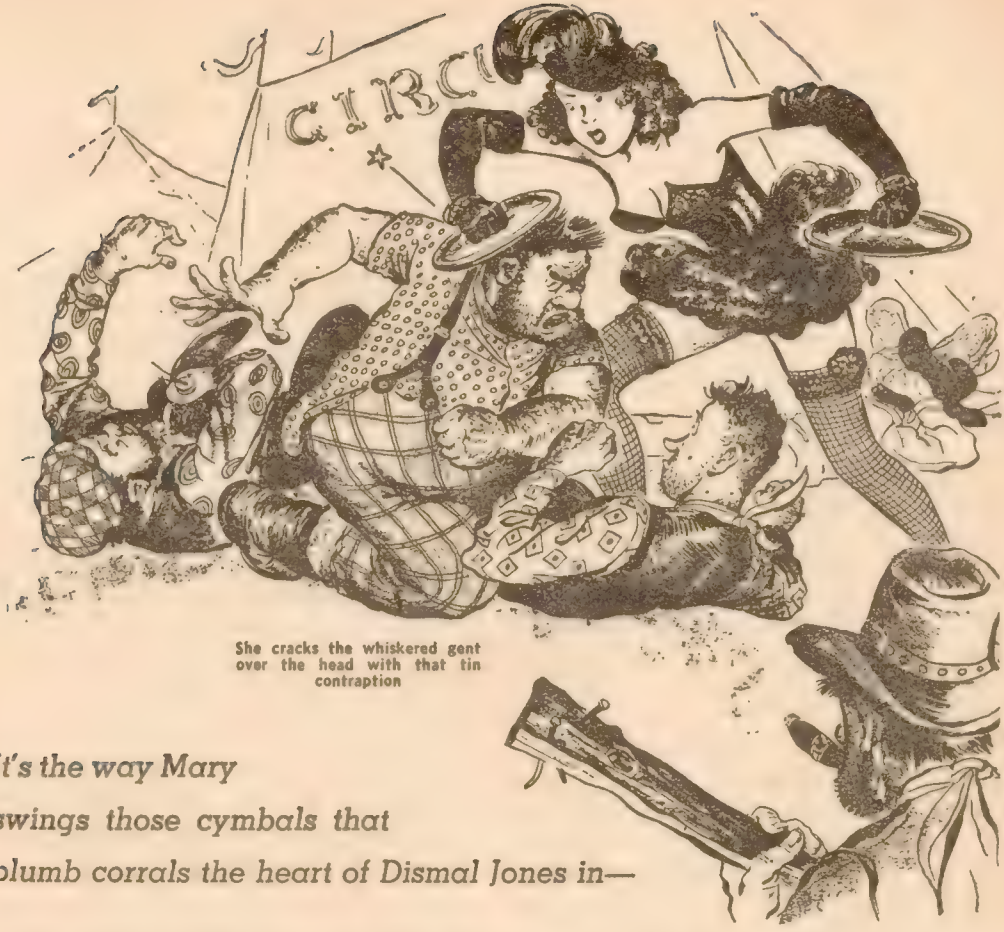
WHAT new dangers are ahead for Lee Stuart as he rides north to join Sam Houston, unaware that he has been branded as a traitor? Molly Odell knows—but can she warn him that he may be riding for a firing squad and shameful death? And what of Jeb Clampett, the loud-mouthed braggart who has made an unholy alliance with the evil Pancho Frias? Will he and Stuart meet again to settle the blood debt that now lies between them? The thrilling answers are in the next installment of—

THE FIGHTING TEXICANS

by

LARRY HARRIS

Coming Next Issue!



She cracks the whiskered gent over the head with that tin contraption

It's the way Mary swings those cymbals that plumb corrals the heart of Dismal Jones in—

SANDSTONE CIRCUS

by Francis H. Ames

THE town of Sandstone ain't liable to ferget the time the circus blew in complete with colored posters and the offer of fifty dollars for the waddie that would ride their outlaw Foxy. Accordin' to the circus folks, this broomtail is a sunfishin', end swappin' fool, and has performed before the crowned heads of Europe.

Considerin' the fact that most of the boys has never seen a circus, this one was a real attraction and the range country as well as the town folks, turns out. What with Dismal Jones swallerin' the grasshopper while tryin' to round up the elephants and Walt Riggs clappin' his saddle on the dancing girl, a right salty time was had by all.

Me and Dismal struck out early so we wouldn't miss any of the proceedin's. The big tent and the red painted wagons was spread out over the alkali flat at the edge

of town when we rode up—the place was buzzin' like a bee-hive. It was gettin' along toward fall but the days was still as hot as a firecracker, with the yellow sun beatin' down like a furnace from the time it stuck it's head above the rim of the Cannon Balls. Such bein' the case, me and Dismal felt like headin' fer the Last Chance Saloon fer a drink, but we postpones this pleasant chore in favor of lookin' over the bronc Dismal plans to ride for the contest money.

This hombre Dismal is a sort of sidekick of mine and he's a jigger who belies his appearance complete. He's a long, skinny jasper from his heels up to his belt, but from then on up he widens out considerable, with a pair of shoulders like a Brahma bull and a neck like a cedar post. Atop of this is the saddest countenance you ever seed. One gent I know told me in strict confidence that whenever he felt real bad himself, he allus went and looked at Dismal. He sez that Dismal looks so much sadder than he feels, that it makes him feel right good by comparison.

Dismal ain't a bad looking waddie at that, with his blue innocent looking peepers and his wavy brown hair. As I said before, the gent don't act nothin' like he looks and has been known to fool some folks complete. If there ever was a quick fightin', loud hollerin' cowpuncher it's him. He's right willin' to fight or frolic at the drop of a hat. He has a nester's outfit back in the brakes that he figures on buildin' into a cow spread on his wages at the ranch—an ambitious cuss he is.

WE hunted up the tent where they kept the horses and locates a fat, shifty-eyed character who seems to be in charge. It don't take us long to find out thet the circus folks don't have no twister and the whole deal is just a come on to lure the boys into town to see the show. With this off our minds, we heads up town to lubricate our necks.

Our broncs sidestep down the main street with their necks arched to fit the grand occasion. The saloon was crowded by this time—every rancher and waddie is on hand from the Little Missouri to the Powder River. What with shootin' the breeze and settin' up the drinks, the time passes. First thing we know, we hear the circus parade comin' up the street with the calliope tootin' and shriekin' for all git out.

We all pours out the doors and some clumsy jasper gets his pants leg hung up on my spur rowel and I falls flatter'n a mack'rel in the doorway. 'Fore I kin rise to my pins to remonstrate, those other gents tromple over my carcass full length.

When I finally get to my pins another hombre slams the bat wings in my face and floors me again. Then I wobbles out in the street where the broncs is fit to be tied with the hootin' and blowing that's comin' up the main drag.

If I do say it, the boys is a right salty bunch and manages to fork their mounts right smart considerin' that they all has had a little too much red eye. I nails onto the ribbons of my filly as she was standin' on her hind legs pawin' the breeze. Let me get holt of a stirrup and a horn, an' I can mount anything that wears hair, drunk or sober. As I come up, Dismal is right beside me with his Stetson on backwards an' his nose redder'n my underwear.

The boys starts whoopin' and yellin' and heads down to meet the parade at the high lope. Man, what a sight that was!

The brass band is leadin' with the instruments gleamin' in the sun and the players steppin' along in their white pants, red coats trimmed with gold and their fur hats a foot high. Behind them comes a red wagon trimmed with gold with a bunch of pretty girls aboard without hardly nothin' on. They is smilin' and flirtin' with the boys fit to kill. Then comes the steam calliope yodelin' for all it's worth with steam and smoke issuin' from it's stack. Behind all this is the elephants with them turbaned gents on top in the little cages, and follerin' along is the cages of monkey's, lions an' such. Yeh, it shore was a sight for sore eyes!

The boys is settin', bug-eyed, lookin' at

the females, sort of relaxed in their hulls, when all hell breaks loose. The broncs don't like no part of that calliope thing at such close range, and with the waddies tryin' to hold them in close to the girls, they goes to buckin' and pitchin' all over the place.

Dismal is a crack bronc peeler, so I thinks he does it on purpose, but he gets throwed plum in the center of them females and his bronc goes sunfishin' thro[illegible] the band with a big, brass horn or[illegible] leg. Course, he tells me later [illegible]s settin' on a quart of bourbon thet [illegible]d in his hip pocket and the thing [illegible]s him off leather two inches. I don't [illegible]ow about thet—he's a sly critter, Dis[illegible]al is.

I think the ruckus would've calmed down if it hadn't been for them elephants. Them broncs is scared enough with the tootin' and bellerin' of the calliope, but when they pitches into the midst of those bacon-sided, long-snouted jungle critters, they goes hog wild. Shorty Down's bronc swaps ends into one of these brutes and said animal whomps it with its trunk. Shorty tells me it durn near druv the horse to its knees.

But this twister of Shorty's is a right proud animal. It hauls off and whangs both heels into the elephant's bread-basket, and it sounds like a watermelon bein' dropped on a drum head. The beast raises its trunk and lets out a blast you could've heard clear out to the ranch. After that, things gets worse every minute.

One minute the street of Sandstone is a millin', whirlin' mess of pitchin' broncs, yellin' cowhands, upset circus wagons, shriekin' females and what have you. The next the whole kit and kaboodle is strung out across the prairie at the high lope. Man, o, man! Did you ever see a herd of elephants gallopin' across the range all mixed up with red wagons, dancin' girls in tights, yellin' cowhands and a slather of monkeys on the loose?

ONE of these monkeys climbs the tail of Sam Wilbur's nag and that animal goes to pitchin'. Sam loses one stirrup and his Stetson and cuts across the line of flight, pullin' leather for all he's worth, with this unhuman tree climbin' beast settin' on his shoulders hangin' onto his hair with both front paws. Sam sez he gets back at the dern thing when he pitches head first into the creek.

"I dives in" says Sam, "clean up to my ankles."

"Heck," I tell him, "you shore were lucky. That mud is more'n ankle deep."

He looks at me real disgusted and says, "Yep, but I wuz ankle deep, head fust."

Dismal is ridin' alongside me, hollerin' like he was hazin' cattle out'n the brush. He shuts up all of a sudden and his face gets red. Looks to me like he's stranglin' to death. He tells me later thet he is just openin' his mouth fer a loud yell when he inhales a two-inch grasshopper.

"That long legged critter crawls around in my innards," he tells me, "until I drowns it with a half pint of red-eye."

"Did thet quiet the grass-hopper?" I asks him.

He looks at me with a more'n usual sad expression when he thinks of the painful experience.

"After a while it did," he says. "But for a few minutes that insect gets a dancin' jag on, he dang near wore the linin' off my gizzard."

We spots the red wagon boundin' along. All them females has been shucked off but one, and she is hangin' on for dear life. The driver is sawin' on the ribbons and I can see daylight between him and the seat every time they hit a buffaler waller. Dismal closes the gap between us and thet thing in nothin' flat and picks the heifer off as clean as a whistle. It was a nice piece of work for my money.

Most of these ridin' hollerin' gents is top cow hands, and 'tain't long till their natural instincts takes over, and they tries to round up the mess. I seen one jasper toss his loop over one of them elephants ears and when the twine tightens his hoss sets back on it's haunches and the hull twitches off like you'd hooked it to a locomotive. Pete Turly tells me he can't get a loop on one of those elephants

to save his life.

He says, "Them critters is just too dang big fer any man's twine, but I shore did snake one of those turban wearin' gents out of his cage in a hurry."

He laughs till the tears rolls out'n his eyes when he thinks about it.

He says, "That yeller skinned hombre with the ten-yard lid sails out'n that box like he wuz hooked to a kite. I'll bet he bounced twelve feet when he landed."

The whole outfit finally winds up in Sandstone Creek. Dismal has plumb disappeared since he tagged onto the dancin' gal and I find myself ridin' herd by myself. I'm trailin' about ten ton of elephant when said critter hits the creek in a ten-foot jump. He's belly deep and madder'n a hornet when I rides up behind him and pops him with the honda of my twine in the rear. Thet insultin' critter inhales about two barrel of alkali water and shoots me in the face with a six-inch stream. It's like ridin' into the business end of a fire hose.

The circus folks shows up and raises all get out with the boys. They sez we don't know nothin' about herdin' stock. Some of the boys was pretty sore about it, but when they see the circus folks throw them iron hooks into the elephants ears and lead them off peaceable, they lets it ride and heads back to the saloon. All this ridin' and hollerin' is mighty dry work.

I meets Dismal at the Last Chance and he tells me thet he didn't have no trouble at all ketchin' his bronc after the animal gets that brass horn off'n its leg. He's all wound up about this here dancin' dame he pulls off the wagon.

"I never thunk," he sez, "that females thet went around in tights was right nice ladies, but this one shore is—she shore is."

"How'd you know she's a lady," I asks him.

HE looks at me kind of sheepish an' gets red in the face but he tells me all about it.

"I handles thet female real gentle," he tells me," but she thinks I hang onto her a mite too long an hauls off and smacks me in the snoot. She says she'll teach me to treat a real lady as such. She say I'm a wall-eyed galoot."

Dismal gets a far away, dreamy look in his eye, and he says in a sort of soft voice, "Ed, that yeller haired heifer kin put her shoes under my bunk any time she's a'mind to."

I snickers when I thinks of Dismal's tar-paper shack out'n the Cann Balls. What a place to take a gold tigh rin' female!

We has a few drinks and runs int t Riggs. He's three sheets in the win luggin' his hull. He says he's goin' to thet circus twister and collect the cont money for shore. Me and Dismal grins b don't tell him what we know. We don'. take to the ugly jasper anyhow. He has a right smart spread down on the Powder and thinks he's king-pin around the range. He claims to be top man with his fists around hereabouts and is a boastin' ornery cuss fer me and Dismal's money.

We sashay down to the big top to buy our tickets for the grand performance. The circus folks has got all the pieces picked up by now and is ready to operate. The ticket jasper isn't going to let us in at first.

He says, "You gents is intoxicated. We don't allow no liquor inside."

"Intoxicated my eye!" sez Dismal. "Yore nose is reddern mine."

Dismal pulls out the gent's nose for a color comparison and he lets us in without no more argument.

Funny thing, me and Dismal don't get to see the big show after all. There's a lot of little tents along the trail to the big top and Dismal wants to take 'em all in. We draws up in front of one where there is a mustached gent standin' on a box hollerin' and yellin' fit to kill. Lined up beside him is the whole string of females that was on the red wagon. Dismal nudges me in the ribs and near breaks one.

"Lookee there", he sez in a loud whisper, pointin' to the female on the far end.

"There's the sweet woman I pulls off the wagon—saved her life, I did."

"I thought you said she slapped yore face," I inquires.

"Shore she slaps my face," says Dismal. "That's the way a spirited lady acts, so I reads in the papers. I wouldn't want no female who wouldn' stand up for her rights."

I think he's crazy but we listens to what the leather lunged jigger is hollerin'.

"Right this way gents," he shouts," this here is fer gents only. Step right up and get your tickets for the hottest dancin' west of Chicago. Two bits gets you inside to view the fanciest steppers in the business. Right this way for yore tickets."

We shucks out our dinero and goes in with the rest of the boys. I sees Walt Riggs goin' in still luggin' his hull and mumblin' about how he cain't find no circus twister to ride. Dang fool should've got sense by this time, like me an Dismal did. I notice he's got his eye on Dismal's gal, same as a lot of the other waddies. She's the best lookin' one in the lot.

The show starts off with the females strung out across the stage and a feller playin' a accordion while another one chimes in with a guitar. They calls that dance the hootchy-kootchy and it's a right interestin' performance. Some of the boys get red and sort of hot under the collar, but Dismal says it's a beautiful performance.

"That female of mine is shore purty," he says. "Bet she'd stand out at Fertile Prairie hall like a show boat on the river."

"Yes," I says. "She'd shore stand out all right, and the other ladies would throw her out on her ear, pronto."

Dismal gets kind of mad at thet and glares at me. "Any hombre lays a hand on that female, and I commits homicide prompt."

I could see that Dismal means it, too, and I figger my side-kick has gone off the deep end complete.

THE second act of the play is to show us ignorant waddies how they dances in different countries. Guess these gals has traveled some cause they goes on to show us how folks hops around in foreign lands. I snicker when I think of Dismal teamin' up with a heifer that has traveled over the world, for he ain't never been outside Custer County. I don't say nothin' though, 'cause I don't want to make him feel bad.

As I says before, this Walt Riggs is an ornery, overbearin' gent an' he's taken on too much red eye. The gals has one dance where they gets down on all fours. Riggs has been gettin' suspicious that they ain't no buckin' bronc to ride and he's pretty sore about now, what with luggin' his hull around all day and boastin' as how he's goin' to ride the brute.

As the gals gets down on all fours and goes sashayin' around the stage, Walt lets a yell out'n him.

"This four flushin' outfit ain't got no bronc to ride", he yowls, and he climbs up on the stage and claps his hull on Dismal's girl, throws a leg over and goes to hat whippin' and hollerin' like he's ridin' contest.

Dismal lets a roar out'n him like a chargin' grizzly and leaps up there and fetches Walt a clout on the beezer. Walt rolls off the gal and sprawls on the floor tangled in his leather. Dismal gives him a kick in the ribs with the sharp toe of his boot.

Riggs ain't no gent to get rough with, careless-like. He comes off the floor with his forty-four ready and Dismal kicks it out'n his hand. It flys across the stage at full cock and goes off with a roar that's deafenin' in the little tent. When Dismal kicks, Riggs grabs his leg and they goes down and rolls off'n the stage.

Everything would have been settled right peaceable if the boys hadn't been sort of mixed in their leanin's. About half of them is from the Powder where Walts hails from and the other half from Dismal's range. They takes side pronto. To make matters plumb worse, some gent hollers "rube" and the circus folks chimes in with tent stakes and such.

Knothole Dobbs and his new missus, the

former widder Malone, is outside. Dobbs tells me the widder wouldn't let him stick his long nose in the girl act place but he says that tent is bulgin' and wavin' like it had the delirium tremens. He says the racket issuin' from it sounds like the battle of the Little Big Horn.

I hangs one on a tall geezer from down Powder River way by the handle of Kant Wilks. When I hangs one on a jasper, he knows it. Some gent clouts me with thet accordion the circus feller was playin', and that foldin' contraption hangs around my neck for the rest of the battle. I couldn't get rid of the thing nohow and it shore interferes with me enjoyin' the party. Every time I swings or goes down and tried to get some gent off'n my neck, that collapsin' contraption lets out a wail like a dyin' coyote. My manuevers is accompanied by the hootin' and tootin' of the thing all through the ruckus.

I puts up a plumb desperate resistance nevertheless.

The thing that helps me out most is a gent's boot I finds on the floor, complete with long shanked spur. I finds out later that some husky circus gent stands on Shorty Down's toe and uppercuts him clean out'n it. Shorty says the wallop near shears his map off, and he crawls under the stage and stays there for the duration.

Anyway some jasper clouts me with the business end of a tent stake and I goes down plumb bewildered for a minute. As I'm crawlin' around tryin' to find room where some gent ain't stampin' and yellin' so I can rise to my feet, I finds this boot. Brother, that thing is shore a terrible weapon. When you massage a gent with the business end of that, said gent looks like he's been sackin' wildcats.

The battle sort of begins to leap out'n holes that appears in the tent as the thing develops, and I unclamps a porky jasper off'n my neck and fetches him a clout with the heel of that boot. This feller had been right active before that, but he gets a glazed sort of look in his eyes and dives under the stage without sayin' nothin'. I'm shore glad to get rid of him. He about tore out my tonsils before I gets him stopped.

I gets a look around then. Most of the boys have moved out'n the tent exceptin' a few thet was stretched out peaceable-like, and the tent looks like it had been used to corral a herd of locoed steers.

BUT the main fireworks seems to be goin' on between Dismal and three circus fellers. Seems they think he started the whole ruckus and they has him down workin' him over to a fare-you-well. One big critter is settin' on him whompin 'im in the snoot, and the leather lun, whiskered gent is circlin' around kick. him in the ribs. Dismal's got his long leg wrapped around the third party hangi on, but I see thet this feller ain't goin' t stay there long. I'm kind of winded myself and I can't see out'n one eye, but I move in to Dismal's aid.

I wobbles up to the scene of battle when this dancin' females shows up. She's armed with a pair of these brass cymbals they clap together when they dance, and she bongs the gent settin' on Dismal a half dozen cracks with these. Sounded like a Chinese cook beatin' on the dinner triangle.

The whiskered jasper reaches fer her jest as I arrives. I'm figurin' on takin' him from the rear real easy like with thet boot, but jest as I hauls off, that dang accordion lets go with a sonorous honk and the gent turns round.

When thet long shanked spur whistles through his beard, he looks real surprised, but when that high heel connects with his jawbone, it durn near shears them whiskers off an he goes out'n the picture without no more foolishness. The other feller gets out'n the grip of Dismal's legs, and he's on his hands and knees when I clouts him back of the ear with the boot. That was the bone-headedest hombre I ever encountered. I clouts him six or seven times between there and the exit, but he's still crawlin' when I sees him last.

When I turns around, that female, whose name is Mary, has everything in hand. She's holdin' Dismal's head in her

lap, wipin' his face with her handerchief. Some of the fellers is still out cold and them that ain't is headin' for parts unknown. The whiskered feller, who owns the dancin' act, is still layin' stretched out like a carpet. Walt Riggs has his head on his hull and I have to look at the feller twice afore I knew who it was. Dismal has sure worked that gent over. Just to make the picture complete, I wrestles that accordion off my neck and hangs it around Walt's. He tells me later that he can't figure how he hooked onto the thing nohow.

When I sees how things is with Dismal and the gal, I takes a sneak too.

Seems like this Mary female turns out to be a lady like Dismal sez. She's a farmer's daughter from down Dakota way and she gets bug-eyed to be a dancin' star. She's right fed up with the hoppin' racket when Dismal comes along and he don't have no trouble gettin' her to high-tail with him before the whiskered feller comes to.

She and Dismal gets hitched a few days later and Dismal says she can't be beat. I was out to their spread a few days ago and Dismal looks saddern'n ever, but he says he's right happy. That shack of Dismal's shines like a new coffee pot and the little lady can cook, too. I ought to know 'cause I et a slather of her sour dough buscuits and baked rump and it tasted right good.

The Last of the Herds

THE WILD pigeon is gone and the buffalo herds no longer shake the earth with the thunder of their hoofs. Old timers who remember longingly the days of unlimited game have for years turned their eyes north and west to Alaska. There the caribou came down out of the mountains in herds of half a million animals And there, during these mass migrations, hunters, Indians, Eskimos and wolves, killed and killed and gorged themselves happily, or wasted meat as profligately as ever the buffalo were killed on the American plains.

It is a sad and dreary story and its repetition brings us no pride. For the caribou, which Alaskan frontiersmen once thought as ineradicable as the buffalo, is now suddenly and alarmingly faced with extinction.

No one seemed to know, or to see it coming. There were millions of caribou. Then Dr. Ira N. Gabrielson, making a survey for the Fish and Wildlife Service, reported that in his opinion there were not more than 100,000 caribou left. The tragedy of the buffalo was again in the making.

Hunters are apt to lay the blame for the killing of the caribou on wolves, but for thousands of years the wolf-packs have trailed the caribou herds and the caribou increased to millions. It was only when man, with the modern high-powered rifle and the happy hobby of slaughtering ten, fifteen or twenty animals for fun or heads, when he is not capable of using even one for food, arrived upon the scene that the herds began to die.

Man, as always, is the really destructive agent and man will have to reverse the process himself if he wants to preserve some remnant of the continent's wild life.—*John Black.*

THE ANGEL *and the* GUN HAND

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Wainright waited three years to even the score with his foe, and then came — showdown!

JIM WAINRIGHT rode toward the hills back of Singletree with a kind of elation at the prospective end of his three-year search for Lee Harmon. He had pictured this moment in his mind a thousand times; he had lived with it on the long trail Harmon had led him, knowing that he would track him down.

Back at the blacksmith shop in town they had told him how to get to Harmon's place, and now he was riding up to the house through a field growing young corn a foot high. He had opened a barbed wire gate to get into the farm.

The house was old and small, of boxing and battens, and it sat dejectedly under a giant sycamore tree. The barn was made of unpeeled poles and had a leanto against it, and back of the outbuildings the fences stopped, facing open grazing ground that extended clear back to the foothills.

As he topped the ridge on which the house set Wainright could see an oat field down to the left toward the creek, and there was activity there. A dozen or more range cows were in the field, eating and trampling down the oats, while two figures on horseback were busy hustling them out. It was too far away from the house for him to recognize the riders, but the field belonged to the farm, and these people

The rustler was racing away

therefore concerned him.

Wainright saw a puff of smoke come from the hand of one of the riders, then saw a cow fall, and then heard the report of the pistol. The rider continued pushing the rest of the stock out toward the pasture ground.

Nobody would be shooting his own stock like that, and shooting a neighbor's stock carried with it the makings of sure trouble.

HE LOOKED around speculatively, searching the foot of the hills and his eyes came to rest on the moving forms of four horsemen approaching across the open land at a pace which churned up dust behind them. The cattle killing had not gone unobserved, for these riders were racing for the oat patch at a determined pace, the rider in the lead waving his hat over his head in some kind of a signal.

Wainright sized up the situation at a glance. These approaching men could easily cheat him of the man he had been intending to kill for three years.

He spurred his horse to reach the people in the oat field ahead of the approaching riders. He was a quarter of a mile from them against a full half mile between them and the four approaching horsemen, and he raced his animal in their direction, following along the fenceline separating the oats from the grazing ground.

Wainright saw as he rode that the fence had been cut between a dozen of the posts. The oats had no protection at all from any cattle grazing on the open ground.

As he came upon the two riders from the oat field they had hazed the last animal out, and now they came together side by side and waited for his approach, sitting their saddles stiffly and keeping an alert eye on the four other riders now within a quarter of a mile of them.

Harmon was not one of the pair.

Wainright reined up before them. One of them was Tabe Hawley, Ann Harmon's younger brother. The other was Ann. Disappointed that Harmon was not with them, he turned his gaze on Ann, and what he saw sent a burning anger through him that her marriage to Harmon could have caused such a change in the girl.

She had lost weight and her face was drawn as with worry and suffering, and now the brown eyes which had once contained such a starry sparklé were deep set and had the look of a harried and frightened animal. She wore an old, faded and patched pair of Levi's, and the boots on her small feet were run over and in need of mending.

She wiped a wisp of unkempt hair back from her face with a work-reddened hand as she looked at him for a long moment. He saw a flicker of emotion cross her face, but before he could interpret it she had forced a weak smile. The effort did not have much success, and she turned another uneasy glance at the approaching horsemen. She was acting as though she were cornered.

"Hello, Jim." There was a self-consciousness in her, and Wainright saw that she was trying hurriedly to adjust herself to the surprise of his presence, and at the same time trying to solve the problem of the approaching horsemen.

Wainright sat rigidly, examining his own feelings at sight of the girl he would have married if Harmon hadn't stolen her away from him. It was as though she were a stranger, and one for whom he had little interest. The picture of her that he had carried in his mind melted away in an instant and left him with only his anger at the man who had betrayed him and her.

"I was looking for Lee," he said, his voice remote and without warmth.

The girl had turned her gaze back to the approaching riders. Now she looked at him with quick suspicion and said, "He's not here."

Her younger brother moved his horse slightly so that it was between her and the oncoming riders and facing them.

Wainright sized it up. "That trouble coming?" he asked.

"Yes," the girl answered wearily. "Barnhill is always trouble." She spoke to her brother. "Tabe, keep your head, now. Don't make things worse."

"And let 'em shoot me down?" the youth responded bitterly. "I didn't mean to kill his cow, but he won't believe that."

The four riders were upon them now, and Wainright rolled a cigarette and put his gaze on the man in front, obviously the leader of the group. Barnhill, he decided. The man had the marks on him of one accustomed to authority. He was blocky and sat solid in his saddle with self-assured quiet. He said to one of his men;

"Check that dead cow just to be sure it's wearin' our brand."

The girl showed a spark of fire. "That won't be necessary," she said. "It is yours, Barnhill. Tabe didn't mean to kill it, but we do mean to keep your stock out of our crops."

The heavy man put his eyes on Wainright and studied him. Then he said, "I don't believe I got yore name."

"I didn't give it."

BARNHILL pondered this a long moment, trying to fit the newcomer into the picture. Then he said, "That's yore affair. But if I catch yuh on my range yuh'd better have a different answer handy."

Wainright let that one pass and gave his attention to the crowd as a whole. The other three riders seemed to have nervous horses which shifted around quite a bit. Wainright knew that move and he watched it with eyes that roved in a motionless head. Barnhill was sitting and looking at both the hands he had on his saddle horn. And he looked up at Ann.

"Girl," he said. "This thing can't go no further. I've told yore husband that he had to get off this range. I'm willing to buy you out in order to keep down trouble. Now, yuh've shot my stock. I'm giving yuh this one more chance to sell out and get out."

"We're not going to sell," Ann answered.

"What's the matter with yuh, woman? Yore husband is willing. Yuh ain't got a right to go against him. Yuh're just begging for serious trouble."

"In this state a homestead belongs as much to the wife as to the husband. This is my home and I'm going to keep it."

Barnhill sighed and dismounted heavily. The girl tensed. Her young brother moved in his saddle, and suddenly one of the men on the horse beside him had his gun in the youth's back and said;

"Take it easy, bub. Lift yore hands."

The boy had been caught unawares, and he raised his hands while the man took the gun from his holster. Another of the riders dismounted, jerked the youth's foot out of the stirrup, lifted his leg and threw him out of the saddle onto the ground on the far side of the horse.

The first rider was on the ground now, and he caught the youth by the collar and jerked him to his feet. Then he doubled his fist and sent a smashing blow into the youth's face. The youth cursed and tried to get free, and the man hit him again, twice in succession, with all his strength.

The girl cried out and slid off her horse and ran toward her brother. Barnhill caught her wrists and held her easily.

Wainright looked around at the last man on horseback and, as he had expected, he saw that the man had his pistol out, resting on his saddle horn and covering him.

Barnhill said, "All right, Jube, teach him a lesson."

Ann screamed. With the horseman's attention fixed on the fight for the fraction of a moment, Wainright acted.

He suddenly spurred his horse into that of the other horseman, throwing the man off balance while trying to get his startled animal under control. And while he was thus engaged, Wainright got his own weapon out. When the man turned back to him he looked down into Wainright's gunbarrel.

"Drop yore guns," Wainright commanded, and the man looked into his immobile face and obeyed.

"That'll be enough, mister," he barked. "Back away from the kid."

Wainright had backed his horse until the sweep of his gun could cover all four men. Jube looked into the muzzle of the weapon, then at Barnhill. Barnhill looked at the gun, shrugged and turned Ann's arms loose.

Wainright's sombre gaze traveled over and stopped on Barnhill. Then he spoke. "Right manly bunch of jaspers, ain't yuh? Now just crawl on your horses and drive

your stock back where it came from."

One of the men looked at him sullenly, and started to pick up his weapon.

"Just leave yore guns here on the ground. Yuh can get 'em later."

Barnhill studied him a long moment after he mounted. "Man," he said, "yuh've dealt yoreself a hand in somebody else's game. Whoever yuh are, yuh'd better check yore hole card pretty carefully."

Then he and his men turned and rode toward the hills.

The youth was bruised but not seriously hurt. He looked at Wainright queerly for a long moment, then said, "I don't know why yuh took a hand in this, but thanks."

"I just don't like to see that kind of work." Wainright answered.

Ann had turned her gaze to the men driving the cattle away. She glanced quickly at Wainright, then said to her brother, "Tabe, when you feel like it, you'd better bring a roll of wire and patch that fence. I'll help you after I talk to Jim."

The youth studied Wainright suspiciously for a long moment.

The girl said, "Please, Tabe."

The boy said, "All right," and rode away.

The girl watched him until he was out of earshot, then turned to Wainright. "Well, Jim, what brings you here?"

THIS woman was so different from the carefree, happy Ann he had loved before that it was as though she were a stranger to him. He had known that what he planned would hurt her, and he was prepared for that, for that was to be her punishment. But he could not find the right things to say to her now because she was so remote from him that he was not interested enough in her to want to hurt her.

"I came here to see Lee," he said.

Her hand went to her throat, the only indication she gave of the fear that was in her. "What for?" she demanded.

Wainright's face was hard. "That's not like yuh, Ann."

"Jim!" Her voice was husky. "Do you mean that you'd kill him?" She was trying to read his features. "Yes," she said as though talking to herself. "You'd do it. Lee was right, you're cold blooded, you're a killer. I couldn't believe it—"

"So he's convinced yuh that I'm a brute, has he? Well, that's wrong, but I won't argue with yuh about it, Ann, because that's not the point of the matter. It's not that he talked yuh into running out on me, but that he talked yuh into doing it behind my back. If yuh'd both come to me and told me how it was—" He shrugged. "What's the use in explaining? Yuh believed him, and here yuh are. Are yuh going to tell me where he is?"

The way her eyes darted around reminded him of a cornered rabbit. She was searching desperately for some defense. And then she seemed to sag hopelessly and there was a deep weariness upon her.

"Look, Jim," she pleaded. "Let's admit that Lee did you wrong. He pleaded with me, convinced me that when you went away you had gone to hire yourself out as a gun hand in that range trouble down in Texas. You knew how I felt about people that lived by the gun, and when I asked you about it you didn't give me an answer. You *wouldn't* answer, and you went away angry, without explaining."

"The secret wasn't mine to dispose of," Wainright said. "My uncle was in trouble and I went to help him—not to sell my guns."

"I didn't know that until—until too late," the girl answered. "If I was wrong in believing what Lee said, then it was my mistake, not his. He thought he was telling me the truth."

"He did not. I had tried to get him to go along with me. He wouldn't, and when I got back and found yuh both gone, of course I knew why."

"That's past," the girl said. "A girl has a right to make her choice, and I made mine."

"And then ran. It probably was his idea, but at least yuh backed it up. And here yuh are. This is what he's done to yuh."

"We're trying to get a new start," she said heatedly. "Lee's had such hard luck,

but we've got a chance now. At least, if we're let alone."

"Yuh don't seem to be let alone. This Barnhill, now."

"He doesn't like us. He claims that we steal his calves."

"And so he cuts yore fences so his stock will destroy yore crops and yuh'll have to move."

"Yes. And I'm afraid Lee will kill him. He's desperate. If we don't make a crop this year we'll have to move again."

Wainright recognized in her voice a weariness of moving from place to place, but the hurt that had been burning in him all these years was not so easily cured, and he kept on with his purpose.

"Do yuh mean Lee will face Barnhill and shoot it out with him?"

THE QUESTION was like a blow in her face. Wainright saw the hurt in her and wished he had not made that remark. It was the hurt in him which spoke.

The girl was struggling with herself, and after a while she seemed to give up the fight. She turned and faced him.

"All right, Jim. Lee's weak. He's probably afraid to face a gun. But give him a chance, Jim. Please, for my—well, I wouldn't ask anything for my sake. But he's trying to get his feet on the ground and make good. You could shoot him down easily. Everybody makes mistakes, and he's made them, too. But now he's trying to straighten up and do something. Why can't you give a man a chance when he's trying to do right?"

Wainright studied her long and carefully, unable to believe that he was hearing her right. He was beginning to see something he had not seen during all these years. At some time since she married Harmon she had come to learn that he was a weakling. And learning that, she had not deserted him, but had kept her bargain. She had made a mistake, but would pay the price. She would even supply strength for Harmon to lean on.

Now he saw this forlorn girl in her faded clothes and with the lines of hardship etched on her face, and saw her humble her pride to plead for the life of the man who had brought her to this. Why? Did she still love Harmon, or did she consider it as part of her duty?

Wainright did not know, but he found something happening to him. Here was much of the Ann he had known and loved, the pride, even though it were humbled now, the sense of loyalty that knew no weakening even in the face of defeat; here was everything except the gaiety and the carefree ease with which she flitted about in the security of her father's big ranch where Wainright and Harmon had worked. And it was only because of her loyalty that she had given up those things, for she could have gone back and have been welcomed with open arms by her father even today.

And suddenly, sitting on his horse and looking down at the girl beside the broken fence of the trampled oat patch, he saw through all these poor things, and saw the girl he had always loved.

And he saw that he still loved her; that he loved her more than ever, if that were possible, because of the things she had gone through. He loved her so much that if it were Lee Harmon, with all his weakness and bluster, that she wanted, she could have him, and he would surrender his claim to her with good grace.

He saw this happening to him and he did not understand it, but he knew it was so. He found the bitterness going out of him and a great sympathy taking its place. He still could not have any respect for Lee Harmon, but he knew that he could only help her through Harmon, for she would have it no other way. And he must not let her know that it was his love for her which prompted his actions.

He forced an encouraging smile to his face, and he said, "Well, Ann, I suppose I was pretty peeved about the whole deal. Pride, I guess. But if yuh love Lee, that's all that matters. We'll forget all about it."

He saw that she was suspicious for a moment, but as she studied him, he saw her hope being born. "You mean that you won't do anything to Lee? That you'll ride on and forget him?"

"Better than that, I'll stick around and patch it up with him."

The girl seemed doubtful for a moment, and then she began to smile. Wainright suspected it was the first time she had smiled in a long time. "I'm glad," she said. "I'd always hoped you and Lee could be friends again. Come on up to the house and I'll get you some supper."

The interior of the cabin was as drab as the outside, even though Ann had tried to give it a cheery look. She had a few sad wild flowers in catsup bottles and fruit jars, and she had made window curtains out of flour sacks with hand work on them.

As Ann cooked meat, he walked around the place observing these things. He stopped at the old fireplace, and found himself gazing at an object that seemed vaguely familiar to him. It was a small white china figurine of an angel with gilded outspread wings standing over a sleeping child in a cradle. It had been broken, and then put together with glue. It was an inexpensive and inartistic piece of decoration, and hardly seemed worth the effort of mending it.

WAINRIGHT searched his memory and could not remember having seen it at the big house on her father's ranch. "This thing," he asked, "it's familiar to me." He looked at the girl.

"You ought to remember it. You gave it to me."

"I did?"

"Yes. Don't you remember once when I was a very little girl and you took me to the rodeo and they had a carnival with it? You won that statue throwing lopsided baseballs at stuffed cats sitting on a rack."

"And yuh kept that piece of junk all these years," he said.

Ann was confused a moment. "Well, we haven't many knick-knacks, and it fills up space."

Wainright put the figure down on the mantel and went out to join Tabe who was gathering tools and wire to fix the fence. Wainright went over to talk to him, for Tabe hadn't appeared friendly. This was not like Tabe, for as a youngster he had thought a whole lot of Wainright back on the ranch.

Tabe's long thoughtfulness seemed suddenly to have born fruit, and he came to a sudden decision. "I don't know why yuh're here," he said, "but I can guess, and if my guess is right, I might as well tell you right now that I'll kill yuh deader'n a slaughtered beef."

"Maybe yuh'd better tell me what your guess is."

"Yuh're here to kill Lee for taking Sis away from yuh, and then take her."

"And yuh're all set to protect both of them? Is that what yuh're living with them for?"

"Protect him!" Tabe repeated angrily. "I'm here to look after Sis."

"To protect her from herself?" Wainright answered. "Whose idea is that? Not hers, I bet."

"Not hers nor mine, either," Tabe answered. "I wouldn't stay around here ten minutes if I had my own way about it. I'd take her back home and tell Lee Harmon to go jump in the creek."

"Then why are yuh here?"

"It's the old man's idea. Sis is too blamed bull-headed to admit she made a mistake, and she won't come home. So the old man made me come up here and kind of stand by."

Wainright turned this over in his mind a long moment before answering. "All right, Tabe," he said. "I'm going to give yuh the whole layout straight from the shoulder and ask yuh to keep it to yourself. Is that a deal?"

"I don't know whether it's a deal or not. I'm looking after Ann."

"All right, yuh can look after Ann. It's this way. You're right, I came here to shoot it out with Lee. Yuh know how I felt about Ann, and I figured Lee gave me a dirty deal. I didn't figure he'd do her any good, either, and it looks like I was right. But that's past. I came here and I saw how tough things were with her, and I knew that I still loved her. Yuh can't understand this, maybe, Tabe, but I think enough of her to forgive Lee, and to help him, because it will make things easier for her.

"If she loves Lee, that's her privilege, and I don't intend to do anything to break it up. And I'm not even going to let her

know that I still love her. That's the story, Tabe. Yuh're going to have to believe all of it or none of it."

The youth leaned over the wagon wheel for quite a long while, lost in thought. He was turning this over in his mind, trying to fit it into the general picture of his troubled world.

"What good do yuh think you could do here?" he asked.

The buzzards had already begun circling over the dead cow in the oat field, and Wainright pointed to them. "There'll be more of them if the signs mean anything," he said. "Lee can't fight Barnhill by himself, can he?"

The boy's face seemed drawn for a moment, and it appeared to Wainright that he was carrying a load too heavy for his young shoulders. The boy was looking at the buzzards with a kind of fascinated horror, and then he broke his gaze away from the scavengers and looked at Wainright.

"Jim, there's a lot more to this than yuh see. I just don't know where to head in."

"Maybe I can help."

"Maybe yuh can. I've got to have help or advice or something, and I haven't got anywhere to turn. They don't like us around here. Yuh saw that. I'm going to believe you, and I'm going to ask yuh what to do. But you can believe me, too, that yuh'd better not have anything up yore sleeve besides what yuh told me. I've got enough worries now."

"All right, kid."

TABE looked thoughtful for a long moment. "Well, it's this way. Barnhill didn't cut our fence. He's big and he's hard as nails, and he wants us away from here, but not because he wants our land. He's no landhog."

"What's his game, then?"

"It's not his game. It's Lee's. Jim, Lee's stealin'."

"Stealing from Barnhill?"

"Yes. In little dabs. Barnhill didn't cut this fence, Lee did it himself. Naturally those range cows are going to come and get into the oats. And when they do, Lee takes a little bunch of them and sells them over at the mining camp by Kiowa. That's where he is now."

"That's pretty strong talk."

"I know it. But I've got eyes, and Barnhill has got eyes. Lee got hold of money from time to time, claiming he'd earned it helping drive a bunch of stock for somebody, or something like that, and I'd check up and find out that he hadn't done any such thing. He said last night that he had a job of work over at Kiowa, and so I started watching.

"He came out and cut this fence just after dark, then went away. About midnight there was a bunch of stock in here, and he came back and drove 'em away. I followed him part way to Kiowa. He was driving Barnhill's stock away to sell."

Wainright pondered this. "And then he could claim that Barnhill was cutting his fences and trying to drive him off this range. That it?"

"Yes. And Barnhill is trying to drive him off, but because he knows he's stealing."

"Barnhill looks like he could get tougher than he was today."

"He can be, I reckon. But he's sorry for Ann. When his wife died when we first came here, Ann nursed her, and he saw she wasn't like Lee, and he thinks a lot of her. He justs wants to get us out of his way without having to hurt anybody. He's pretty decent."

"He must be. You didn't tell Ann about this?"

"How can I? I'd rather take a beating—"

"Yuh did, and kept yore mouth shut. Tabe, yuh're all right. But what are yuh goin' to do about it? Barnhill evidently thinks yuh're in with Lee. This can't go on."

"I know it can't and I don't know what to do. That's why I was telling yuh this; asking yuh what to do. If it ain't stopped, Barnhill is going to catch him and kill him or hang him for a thief, and maybe me, too, and yuh know what that'll do to Ann."

"Yes, I know. That leaves it up to us to stop Lee."

"If we jumped Lee, he'd just swear we

were lying, and Ann would believe him," the youth argued.

"I'll try to figure something," Wainright said. "And I think maybe yuh'd better take the night off and go to town. I'll talk to Lee when he comes in."

Tabe turned this over in his mind. "Maybe I will," he said. "I haven't been to town in quite a while. I can fix the fence tomorrow."

They went into the house and Ann had supper ready. Wainright noticed the change in her, and he saw that Tabe also noticed it. There was a new squareness to her shoulders; she had fixed her hair and got into a clean dress, but the greater change was deeper than in her looks. There was a lightness to her step, and the harried, suspicious expression was gone from her eyes.

Outside, as they fed their horses after supper, Tabe said, "She thinks that now yuh're here her troubles are all finished." He shook his head. "I reckon when a woman loves a man she thinks he can do miracles."

Wainright answered, "I don't see how I could pull anything out of a hat even if she did still love me."

Tabe gazed at him with disbelief. "You're not trying to deny that yuh know she still loves yuh, are you?"

"She couldn't still love me. And as things stand, I reckon it's better that way."

"I thought yuh were smart," Tabe said. "Lee was pretty full one night, and he got mad about her keeping that little china angel on the mantel. He took it and threw it out through the window, and broke it. Just plain jealous, I reckon. The next day when he woke up he found that she'd stuck it together again with the white of an egg, and put it back on the mantel. He ain't opened his mouth about it since."

Tabe mounted and headed out a short-cut to town.

JIM WAINRIGHT suddenly did not want to find himself alone with Ann, for this news disturbed him and made his position more difficult. He went and saddled his horse, mounted and came back by the door. He shouted in to her:

"I'm going to ride up the road a piece toward Kiowa. Might meet Lee."

The girl came to the door opening with a plate and towel in her hand. "You'll fix things up with him, won't you, Jim?"

"I sure will," he promised, and rode away. He only knew that he was going to meet Lee and somehow put a stop to the thing he was doing. And then he was going to ride on. If Ann still loved him, it was not right for him to linger here.

The moon had come up full, and as he rode out of the dark tree-lined stretch of the road and into the moonlight he pulled his horse up short and listened. He had heard a single shot in the distance, and as he halted his horse he heard a scattered volley. The sound came from ahead.

He was a mile from the homestead now, and about three miles from Kiowa, and according to his quick estimation, the shooting was probably close to Kiowa.

He turned around and rode back until he was again lost in the shadows of the overhanging trees, and waited. After a while he heard the faint pounding of galloping hoofs, and the sound grew slowly until he could make out the figure of the approaching horseman. As the horse and rider came still closer he saw that the man was weaving in his saddle and clinging to the horn with both hands. At times the man's head almost touched the saddle horn, at other times he leaned over so far sideways that it seemed he would fall to the ground.

When the man was within a hundred yards of him, Wainright lifted his pistol and went out to meet him. The approaching horse saw him emerge from the darkness, and broke its pace, but the man seemed not to notice.

Wainright brought his animal to a stop crossways of the road, blocking it. Then he shouted, "Hold it up, man. I want to see you."

The approaching horse was slowing of his own accord, and still the rider seemed to pay no attention, being too busy trying to stay in the saddle. The horse slowed down to a walk and finally stopped at a word from Wainright. The rider slumped over forward in his saddle and clung to

the horn to keep from falling off. Wainright pulled up to him.

The horseman was Lee Harmon, unkempt and leaner than when Jim had last seen him. Harmon groaned and put one hand to the side of his chest.

"Harmon, this is Wainright. What's the matter?"

Harmon seemed for the first time to sense the presence of the other man, and also seemed to realize what he could expect from him.

"All right, Jim, go on and shoot. I'm already half dead."

"Who shot yuh?"

"I don't know." Harmon almost fell out of his saddle.

Wainright pulled his horse against that of Harmon. "Listen here, I'm not here to shoot yuh. I told Ann I'd help yuh, and that's what I mean to do. But yuh've got to come clean with me. Did Barnhill finally catch up with yuh sellin' his yearlings?"

"I never have—"

Wainright reached over and shook him impatiently. "Listen Lee, yuh're in no shape to go on playing that game. Barnhill knows about it, Tabe knows about it, and I do. That's all over. Understand?"

Harmon again almost slid out of his saddle, and Wainright dismounted and helped him down, where he stood supporting himself with a hand on the horn and one on the cantle.

"Ann. Does she know?"

"No. How bad are yuh shot?"

"Through the ribs; must be pretty deep. Tasting blood."

"What happened? You sold Barnhills's stuff to that mining camp back of Kiowa?"

Lee Harmon was too far gone to play his game any further. "Yes, and Barnhill had a man planted there. I got away from him, but he beat me to Kiowa, and Barnhill was there. One of 'em shot me."

"Think yuh can stand to go on much farther?"

"No. I was going to get Ann to take care of the wound and help me hide out on the creek, if I could only get there."

"And tell Ann that Barnhill waylayed yuh?"

"Well, didn't he?"

"All right, forget it. I'll get yuh a doctor. Take my horse. I'll stay here and hold up Barnhill long enough for yuh to get patched up and get going again."

Harmon groaned, turned and staggered around so that he was grasping Wainright's saddle. "Help me on, will yuh, Jim? And thanks."

"Just get going," Wainright snapped. "I hear horses," He got Harmon into the seat of the saddle, saw him clutching the horn, and slapped his horse's hip. "Keep moving," he ordered, and watched the animal disappear into the darkness.

WAINRIGHT turned to Lee's horse, found Lee's rope and untied it. Then he noted something else. There were a pair of leather saddlebags behind the saddle. He unbuckled the bag and brought out a small doeskin poke.

Lee Harmon had ridden away leaving in the saddlebag the money he had received for the stolen stock.

He left the horse standing, stepped over into the woods and hid the money under a large slab of sandstone, then returned to the road.

The sound of approaching horsemen was growing louder, and now Wainright tied the reins of Harmon's animal to a buckbrush switch alongside the road, backed into the brush and waited with his gun drawn.

The horsemen came in sight, spotted the animal and slowed down. They halted and consulted together in low voices for a moment, then approached carefully with guns drawn. Wainright recognized Barnhill's voice giving directions, made out the form of Jube and the other man.

"His, all right," Jube said. "He must be around. Could be a trap."

Barnhill said, "He's not the kind to lay traps."

"I still say I heard him yell when I shot," Jube argued. "Maybe I did hit him. Maybe he couldn't get no farther. Wait a minute."

Jube pouched his weapon and slid off his horse, going over and examining the horse. He fished a match out of his pocket and

struck it.

"Hit him," he announced. "Blood on the horn. Keepin' his hand on the wound, then having to grab the horn to support himself. We got him bad."

Barnhill and the other rider pouched their weapons, dismounted and joined Jube. Barnhill said, "Yeah, that's about what happened. Well, we've got him now. All we've got to do is to find him."

Wainright came up out of the bushes with his gun trained on the men who stood with their heads together at the saddle.

"Hold still, gents," he said quietly.

Jube cursed, and the three turned to face Wainright. Barnhill was quiet a moment while his methodical mind digested this turn in the affair. Then he said, "I don't believe I'm going to put my hands up for any danged rustler. If we just spread out, boys, he can't get all three of us before we get him."

Wainright said, "That's right, Barnhill, but my gun is trained on you. Yuh know that if yuh spread out it will be you personally that I'll get before yore boys get me. I say, yuh don't doubt that, do yuh, Barnhill?"

Barnhill's answer was to spit on the ground.

Wainright said coldly, "That boy you beat up this morning means something to me. Do I have to tell yuh again to raise yore hands?"

Barnhill studied this and made his answer. "It's his turn, boys. No use getting one of us killed for the likes of Harmon."

In ten minutes Wainright had the three disarmed and tied to trees with pieces of lariat. When he had finished he said, "I don't want to be any harder on yuh than you make me be. I'll be back for yuh later."

He mounted Harmon's winded horse and rode back toward the house, dreading the task of facing Ann, not knowing what he would find there, but painfully fearful of whatever it would be.

As he approached the house he saw a dim light shining through the open door. The sound of his horse had attracted Ann, and she came out slowly, like a sleepwalker. She did not speak, but stood as though she were stunned, her hands clutched into tight fists, her hair dishevelled and apparently all the stamina drained from her tired body. Wainright took her arm. "Where's Lee?" he asked.

"Dead," she sobbed, and then the long repressed flood of tears broke forth and she cried without ceasing. Wainright put an encouraging arm around her and let her cry, until the well of her tears was empty.

"He told me everything, Jim. Everything. About Barnhill's cattle. About you helping him up the road. He was sorry, Jim, but it was too late."

"Where is he?"

"On the bed in the house. He wanted me to bandage him up and then he was going to hide out until you could get a doctor for him. But the bullet must have punctured his lung, because suddenly he was bleeding at the mouth, and then it was over. Jim, I don't know what to do now. We've wronged Barnhill—"

Wainright's hand was heavy on her shoulders, as though by this gesture he could pass some of his own strength on to her. He was quiet a long moment, and he chose his words carefully.

He said, "I want yuh to get yoreself together now, girl, and understand what I'm saying, and why. Yuh're going to have to let me manage this."

"I will, Jim." Her voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"I've got Barnhill tied up down the road. First, we've got to go to him. I've got the money Lee got for the stock he took last night. I'll give it to Barnhill. We'll have to tell him all the facts, and we'll have to give him satisfaction in any way he wants it. He's hard, but I don't think he'll take advantage of yuh under the circumstances. He was willing to buy yuh out so I believe it will be satisfactory with him if yuh were to tell him that yuh'll deed him the place to cover any other losses he might have suffered. Are yuh agreeable to that?"

"That's the only fair thing to do," she answered. "It will be terrible facing him. I couldn't stay here another day. But I couldn't face going home, either."

"I'll talk to him. Yuh can just verify what I say. And then, after we bury Lee, I'm going to send Tabe and you down to my ranch. Yuh see, the uncle I went to help, died and left the place to me. I've got a fine man running it, and he's got a wife that's the most wonderful motherly person yuh ever saw. I want yuh to rest up a few months there—"

"But I don't know, Jim. After all, I don't see how I can take all this from you after I've hurt you the way I did. It doesn't seem right."

"I hurt you when I expected you to wait for me while I went out to do some gun-fighting without giving you an explanation. We've hurt each other enough, Ann, and we've gone through too much together to let that stand between us. All we live for is to collect a handful of memories; memories of things we did right and things we did wrong. The foolish thing is to go on and do more wrong things because we were unwise once. We have to be hurt in order to know the value of the good things, I reckon. Anyway, we'll talk about these things later when you're rested up. We'll have a lot to talk about then."

"Yes, Jim, we will."

Wainright took his protective arm from around her, and rolled a cigarette. His face showed her the firm lines of his chin, the grave look about his eyes in the yellow glow of the match.

Then he said, "This is going to be hard, Ann, but I'm with yuh. Do yuh feel like going down the road and seeing Barnhill?"

The girl stood uncertain a moment, the shreds of her long anxiety still clinging to her. Wainright took a draw on his cigarette, and she saw the strength of his face in the glow. She straightened her shoulders and her head came up to its old proud tilt. She took his arm.

"Yes, Jim," she said.

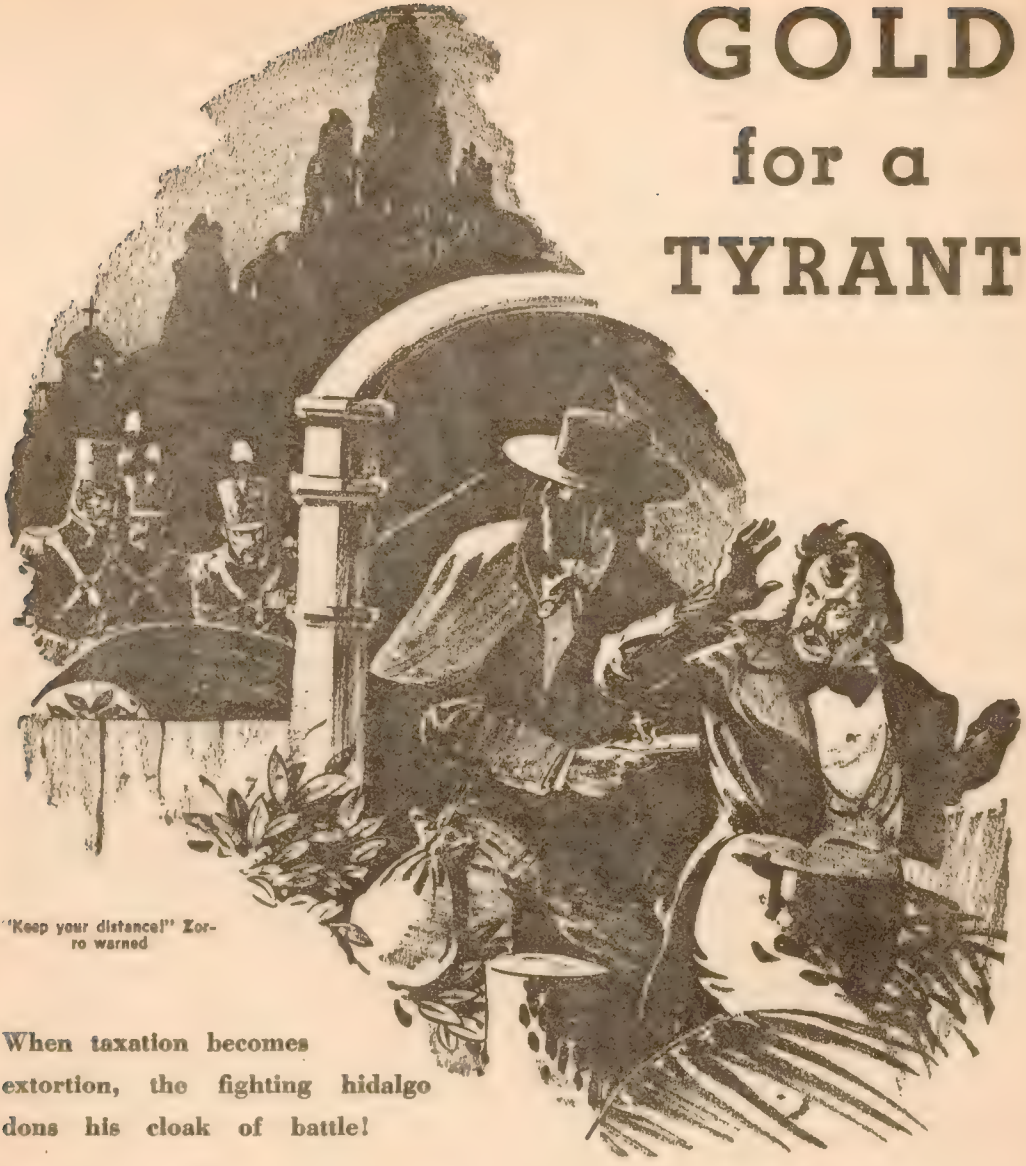
Rustlers on the Range

THE WORD "rustler" had a very innocent beginning. It meant exactly the same as "hustler." Back in the time of Samuel Maverick when thousands of unbranded cattle roamed the ranges, they were considered fair game for any cattleman who got to them first with a branding iron. Cowmen therefore offered their punchers a bonus of from $2 to $5 for each maverick they turned in properly stamped with the home ranch brand. The cowboys, anxious for extra money, would light out and "rustle" for mavericks—the whole procedure being entirely legitimate.

It is easy to see how the word developed from there. A cowboy who "rustled" a little too energetically began to be looked upon with misgivings and the word "rustler" when applied to him became more sarcastic than complimentary. And finally it began to mean someone who was entirely too careless about the calves he branded and so at last became synonymous with thief.

—Tex Gainesville.

GOLD for a TYRANT



"Keep your distance!" Zorro warned

When taxation becomes extortion, the fighting hidalgo dons his cloak of battle!

IT WAS A bright morning in Reina de Los Angeles, with a soft breeze blowing in from the distant sea. Diego Vega enjoyed the day as he strolled languidly toward the plaza, and the little chapel, for a talk with Fray Felipe, his confessor and friend of the Vega family.

Diego held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils as several vaqueros galloped up, the hoofs of their spirited mounts lifting clouds of sandy dust. He was known to be fastidious. Some whispered that he bordered on the effeminate. But those who whispered did not know that Diego Vega,

A Zorro Story by JOHNSTON McCULLEY

heir to wealth, an apparent fop, was also Senor Zorro, the masked daredevil who rode the highways to right the wrongs of the downtrodden.

Diego went on leisurely, only to curl his lips in an expression of disgust as a long line of lumbering oxen-drawn carts appeared, creating new dust clouds. Diego was coughing when he finally was able to get out of the drifting dust. But it was the busy season in the rancho district, and it was a great rancho that poured new wealth into the coffers of the Vega family.

"Enough discomfort for one day," Diego muttered. "I'll soothe my nerves as I listen to Fray Felipe."

As he neared the tavern he heard a man bewailing his unjust fate, heard raucous laughter, the swish of a whip and a howl of pain. A short, obese man in rather expensive clothing yet in poor taste stood in front of the tavern, a whip in his hand. Kneeling before him was a barefooted peon, his arms wrapped around his head for protection from the whip. Off to one side four strangers to Diego held an ewe with a thong about her neck.

"Enough of this!" the man with the whip shouted to the peon. "I desire no more argument. Be on your way, or this whip will cut the skin from your back in ribbons!"

"Have mercy, senor!" the peon screeched. "The ewe is all I have in the world."

"You err," the other man replied. "You do not have the ewe. It is now the property of His Excellency, the Governor. You have not paid your tax, so we take your ewe. And for trying to evade payment of this just tax, I shall ask the magistrado to sell you into peonage for one month, unless you pay a fine. Since you had no money for taxes, you have none with which to pay a fine, hence you will work out double the amount in peonage."

"My wife and children will starve—"

"The sufferings of your wife and brats do not interest me."

Diego stopped beside the tavern keeper, who stood in his doorway.

"Who is the man who threatens the poor fellow?" Diego asked.

"He is Carlos Barbosa, a new tax gatherer sent by the Governor from Monterey. Those other fellows are his assistants. Never have I seen a tax gatherer work more thoroughly. He does more than take the shirt off a man's back—he takes the hide beneath it."

"The peon has worked on our rancho," Diego explained. "He is a worthy fellow."

The peon looked up. "Don Diego!" he cried. "Help me, Don Diego!"

AS DIEGO shuffled forward in his resplendent garb, the tax gatherer turned his head quickly. "What is this tumult, senor?" Diego asked Barbosa.

"The rascal owes taxes, and I am gathering them, senor. He declared he had no property, and I find he had an ewe about to yean."

"Tell him, Don Diego, that your august father gave me the ewe," the peon begged.

"That is true," Diego said.

"The start of a flock!" the tax gatherer said, laughing boisterously. "We should watch out, Don Diego, or some of these fellows will be owning our fine ranchos."

"How much is the tax?" Diego asked.

"It would have been half a peso. But because he hid his property, the tax is doubled."

Diego turned to the peon. "Why did you hide the fact that you owned an ewe?" he asked.

"It is all I have, Don Diego. And I did not have a coin with which to pay."

Diego took a coin from his pocket and tossed it to Barbosa.

"Here is thrice your tax, senor. Take it, and give this man his ewe."

Barbosa pocketed the money. "As you say, Don Diego. But be soft with one of his ilk, and thousands will beg mercy, and then where will the taxes come from? The Governor is in sore need of taxes. Maintaining a position of state is expensive."

"I understand," Diego interrupted. He faced the peon. "Take your ewe, and go

home," he ordered. "Your tax has been paid."

"Ah—but one moment!" Barbosa said.

"What now?" Diego raised his brows slightly.

"The matter of the tax is settled, Don Dego. But there remains the criminal act of refusing to declare property. For that, the rascal must be jailed and fined. No doubt the fine will be a large one, and he will go into peonage to work out its double worth."

Diego's eyes glittered. "Can you not overlook such a little thing at this time?"

"I must enforce the laws, Don Diego."

"It would mean that the man must work for months for no pay. His family will have difficulty—"

"Bah! Such families scourge the land!"

"Why are you so bitter?"

Carlos Barbosa stepped nearer and lowered his voice. "Such men are born to be exploited by us, by men of the upper classes. Whenever I bring a fellow to justice, I get a percentage of the fine." He laughed lightly.

That sent a surge of resentment through Diego. "It is my advice to you, senor, to take this man before the magistrado immediately," he said. "I intend to pay his fine, whatever it is, and have him in peonage to me."

"I can see you are an excellent business man, Don Diego! Put him on your rancho, with a good overseer who does not spare the whip, and you will get the worth of your money."

DIEGO BRUSHED the scented handkerchief across his nostrils again.

"It is my intention to remit the deed of peonage to him and let him attend to his own affairs," he replied. "Take the man to the magistrado immediately."

"I am handling this affair, Don Diego. I am an official."

"Have you ever heard of the power of the Vega family?" Diego asked him.

"I have, senor. And have you ever heard of the power of His Excellency, the Governor?"

"I have heard of many things concerning the Governor," Diego replied. "I have even heard how the *hidalgos* from one end of Alta California to the other have petitioned the Viceroy in Mexico for the Governor's removal—which undoubtedly will occur. It is natural for His Excellency, and His Excellency's henchmen, to grasp all they can before that comes to pass."

"You dare speak treason?"

"Were it treason," Diego declared, "the Governor would not dare assert it to be such. Let us go to the barracks and have this man tried. He will walk beside me. Have your men bring along the ewe, and hold their pistols ready. A tired, hard-working peon and an ewe about to yean—dangerous things that should be under the muzzles of pistols always."

"We go to the barracks, Don Diego, but I will make a report of the occurrence to Monterey."

"Oh, certainly, senor! Send your report by a swift courier. I would not be in your boots, senor, for half the world."

"And why not?"

"I was thinking of the fellow who calls himself Senor Zorro. He attends to affairs like this. No doubt this cruelty of yours will be reported to him."

"Ha! If the rogue shows himself in my neighborhood, I will earn the Governor's reward for his capture! Don Diego, I do not like your words and attitude."

"That pleases me exceedingly, senor. Let us get to the barracks. And be kind enough to walk on my left. There is a stench about you. I do not desire to have it offend my nostrils. . . ."

With Diego Vega sitting on the bench reserved for men of position, the man acting as magistrate in the absence of the alcalde was disposed to be lenient in the case of the luckless peon. He fined him five pesos, and bounded him in peonage to Diego, who paid the fine. Diego at once entered an order that the fine had been worked out, and the peon went on his way a free man, leading his ewe and shouting his praise of Diego Vega and all his family.

Sergeant Manuel Garcia, acting as commanding officer in the pueblo, met Diego

outside the barracks.

"Don Diego, my friend, I am a rough man," the sergeant declared, "but men like this tax gatherer turn my stomach."

"He is a rascal serving another rascal higher in rank," Diego observed.

"This case is only one of many. He is frightening our peons and natives half to death. They will be taking to the hills until the tax gatherer is gone, and no work will be done."

"The affair has unnerved me," Diego complained. "I was going to converse with Fray Felipe, but now shall return home. Why cannot we have peace and quiet in the world?"

"Ha! We are like to have still less of it if Senor Zorro hears of this occurrence."

"There you go, adding to my misery by mentioning that turbulent fellow!" Diego rebuked. "How is it that you and your soldiers do not catch the rascal?"

"Don Diego, this Zorro has been too clever for us. But we shall catch him. He will make some little mistake. I shall contrive to have troopers in the vicinity of the tax gatherer continually, so if Zorro appears to punish him he will run into a trap."

"What sort of a trap could you contrive?" Diego asked. "You would shoot him on sight, perhaps?"

"Not if we can catch him alive, Don Diego. The Governor is eager to have him hanged as a lesson to the peons and natives. Ha! I am anxious to see the face behind the mask the rogue wears. It might surprise me."

"That is possible," Diego admitted.

He brushed his scented handkerchief across his face quickly to hide his slight smile, then turned and walked slowly toward his father's house.

SENOR CARLOS BARBOSA, the tax gatherer, must be punished. The peons and natives would expect Zorro to do that. Barbosa had stripped men of their last small coins and their goods. Zorro, if possible, should see that the men were repaid. They labored hard to keep themselves and families half fed, and even a coin of smallest value meant much to them.

Diego reached home to find his aged father sitting in the patio sipping wine and eating little cakes. Diego sank upon a bench beside him and, in low tones, told Don Alejandro what had happened.

He clapped his hands to call a servant, and ordered the servant to send Bernardo to him. Bernardo, Diego's huge deaf mute body-servant, was one of only three persons in the world who knew Zorro's identity.

Bernardo appeared and stood before Diego and Don Alejandro, his head bowed.

"Have you heard of the doings of the new tax collector?" Diego asked him, in a low voice.

Bernardo made a guttural sound, and rage flamed in his face.

"Zorro rides tonight," Diego told the mute, almost in whispers. "Have everything ready an hour after darkness. . . ."

Clouds drifted in from the sea, a mist came with them, and the mist finally changed to a drizzle of rain. None was abroad save those compelled by business.

Dressed in his black costume with black mask, riding his powerful black horse, with his blade at his side, a pistol in his belt and his long whip fastened to the pommel of his saddle, Senor Zorro traveled cautiously through the inclement night.

A short distance from the town, a small fire burned beside the highway, and around it were three men in ragged clothing and without shoes. One was gnawing fragments of meat from a bone, and the others were hunched in misery.

Out of the night came the masked rider to stop his horse near the fire. The three men sprang up in quick alarm.

"Do not be afraid," the rider told them. "I am Zorro. Have any of you been mistreated by Carlos Barbosa, the tax gatherer?"

All three had been. One exhibited a raw back where the lash of Barbosa had fallen. Another had run away when the tax gatherer would have arrested him and held him for peonage. The third had

given his last small coin.

"Leave your fire," Zorro instructed. "Seek out others who gave their money to the collector. Tell them to have their tax receipts with them. If I am successful in what I shall attempt to do tonight, they will be repaid. Tell all to await me in the little hut off the highway, about a mile north of town. Keep quiet. The troopers may be out tonight."

Zorro rode on, and the men extinguished their fire and scattered.

At the edge of the pueblo, Zorro turned aside, fearing some wayfarer would see him. He rode behind a large adobe building near the rear of the tavern.

Lights streamed through the windows of the tavern to turn the falling raindrops into jewels. From the place came raucous talk, loud laughter and ribald song. Men were making merry, no doubt seeking to purchase friendship with the tax gatherer with gifts of wine.

Zorro's eyes searched the shadows. He saw nothing to inform him where horsemen might be lurking. Finally he dismounted and ground-hitched his horse. He went forward afoot, pistol ready, eyes alert and ears attuned to catch the slightest warning of danger.

When he was near enough to look through one of the windows, into the main room of the tavern, he could see Carlos Barbosa sitting at the end of a long table with a goblet of wine before him. It was evident he was the host.

Men were drinking with him and listening to his experiences. The tavern keeper's peon servants scowled at the tax gatherer. And at one table sat a single trooper. Sergeant Garcia would have more than one trooper stationed near Barbosa, Zorro thought, so other troopers must be in hiding in the vicinity.

ZORRO retreated from the window and made his way to the patio in the rear. One torch was burning beneath the covered arches. Nobody was at the well or beneath the arches.

A sudden streak of light shot into the patio, and Zorro withdrew quickly. The door of the main room had been pulled open. Standing in the doorway, weaving a little, was the tax gatherer.

"I am not leaving you, amigos," he called back to those in the room. "I merely go to my room to get more money for wine. I find it better to pay cash than to let the landlord keep account which can wander at times."

A burst of laughter greeted the sally. Barbosa started to reel along beneath the arches, approaching the burning torch. Somebody in the main room closed the door to keep out the storm.

Zorro wondered if this could be a trap. His eyes searched the dark spots of the patio again, but saw nobody. He saw the tax gatherer open the door of a room and light a taper, and nobody appeared.

Zorro opened the lattice gate carefully and slipped inside the patio, keeping to the darkness. He stepped cautiously toward the door of the room Barbosa had entered, flattening himself against the adobe wall.

No sound caused him alarm. He advanced to the side of the door and stood waiting, watching, listening, his pistol held ready.

He could hear the tax gatherer inside, fumbling around, and humming a drinking song. There was no sound in the patio except the rush of the wind and pattering of the rain.

The door was pulled open slowly. Zorro was inside instantly, had pushed Barbosa back, and closed the door behind him. With a squawk, the tax gatherer recoiled against the wall, his face a picture of fright in the light from the guttering taper.

"Not a sound!" Zorro ordered. "Not a move, if you care to live!"

It seemed to Zorro that Barbosa's fright disappeared swiftly, as if a reassuring thought had come to him. Zorro's dramatic entrance had startled him, no doubt, but he seemed to have remembered that there was actually little to fear.

"What—what—" he mouthed.

"I am Zorro—but perhaps you have guessed that. I have come to deal with you for your mistreatment of peons and

natives. You are a cheap swindler, senor, who preys upon his fellowmen as a buzzard upon carrion. Hand me at once a bag of money sufficient to restore to those you have robbed the few poor coins you took from them! Then, senor, I shall deal with you."

"If you dare seize the Governor's tax money—" Barbosa began.

"The Governor may have one less jewel to buy for some light woman," Zorro broke in. "Let him anguish! At once, if you care to continue living!"

Zorro watched carefully while Barbosa went to a large piece of luggage, unlocked it and took from it a leather sack with neck tied with a thong.

"Put it upon the table and open it," Zorro ordered.

The tax gatherer did so with trembling hands, then stepped back. Zorro took a swift step forward and saw that money really was in the bag. Watching Barbosa carefully, Zorro tied the bag again and attached it to his belt with the thong.

"Senor Barbosa," he said, "a man like you does not deserve to live. But you should be punished for your actions. Today you cut the backs of a couple of poor men with a whip. When I have finished with you, senor, you will need a deal of salve for your back."

"If you dare attack an official—" Barbosa began again.

"I have attacked some higher than you," Zorro reminded him. "It occurs to me, Senor Barbosa, that you are not sufficiently frightened. Perhaps troopers are awaiting my exit, eh? Garcia and his men are guarding you, believing I would attack you for what you have done?"

Barbosa's facial expression changed swiftly, and Zorro knew his guess had been correct.

"Perhaps you think you have me in a trap," Zorro told him. "The window is too small for me to get through it. I must go through the door, it appears, to make my escape. But I will hold my pistol's muzzle at your back, senor, and use your fat body as a shield. If troopers attack me as we emerge, you die!"

"No—no!" the tax gatherer cried. "They instructed me to do this. They thought you would attack me here to get the tax money."

"And they are waiting outside, eh? Face the door, senor, and raise your hands above your head. Instantly!"

THE tax gatherer did so. Abject terror had seized him. Holding his pistol in his right hand, Zorro picked up the taper with his left. He stepped up behind Barbosa and jabbed the muzzle of the pistol against the base of the man's spine.

"A shot would crack you in two," Zorro informed. "Put out your hand, and when I extinguish the taper unbolt and open the door. Hesitate, and you die!"

The tax gatherer extended a shaking hand and seized the bolt.

"Now!" Zorro ordered, and smashed the burning taper against the wall, to plunge the room into darkness.

He thrust harder with the pistol muzzle. The tax gatherer pulled the door open and faint light from the patio torch revealed him.

"He has a pistol at my back!" he began screeching. "He will slay me if you make a move! Do not attack him!"

Zorro put his left arm around Barbosa's neck and choked, and the man's wild cries ended in a squawk. Zorro could see three troopers within a short distance.

"Zorro!" one called to him. "Deliver yourself!"

A rumble of laughter came from Zorro's throat. "Keep your distance, senores, or you will be responsible for the death of one of the Governor's officials," he warned.

He pulled the tax gatherer along beneath the arches, out of the streak of light from the torch and toward the gate in the patio railing. He released pressure on Barbosa's throat, and the tax gatherer began howling again:

"Do not attack! He will pistol me!"

They came to the little gate, and Zorro kicked it open. A gust of wind spattered the rain upon them. The storm was in-

creasing in wildness, which suited Zorro's purpose. He pulled Barbosa through the gate and started him toward where the black horse was waiting.

"Do not attack!" the tax gatherer continued howling.

Zorro whispered for him to be silent. He could see nothing in the black night, and no sounds reached him from the direction of the horse. But the sound of boots squashing in the mud told him the three troopers were following carefully.

"Do not come too near!" Zorro called. "This man dies if you do! My regards to Sergeant Garcia, and tell him to think of a better trick next time."

As he spoke, Zorro was wondering how it happened that Garcia was not with his men. It would be a torment to the sergeant if he had been taking his ease before the roaring fire in the main room of the tavern while this happened.

He pulled Barbosa along again and reached the horse.

"Senor," Zorro told him, "you are fortunate. Were it not for the troopers, and that I have something else to do, I'd use my black whip on you with my full strength. But I shall be watching your antics, senor. And you will receive another visit from me if you mistreat any more men or work hardships upon them. Cheap swindler that you are!"

Zorro struck twice with the barrel of his pistol, knocking Barbosa to the ground and marking his face. As the tax gatherer howled with pain and fright, Zorro got into saddle and gathered up his reins.

He shouted a mocking farewell to the troopers, touched with his spurs and rode. Behind him pistols exploded, but no bullet came near him. The troopers were firing wildly in the darkness, at the sounds of his horse's hoofbeats.

There was no pursuit. Zorro decided the troopers' mounts had been tied at the side of the tavern, and that it would take them some time to get into saddles, and pursuit then through the black, rainy night would be futile.

He got away from the pueblo and started toward the distant hut where he had instructed the peons to wait with their fellow sufferers at the hands of Barbosa. Zorro rode with caution, though nobody seemed to be on the highway.

As he neared the spot, he circled to the rear of the hut. As he guided his horse down the slippery slope, the wind carried voices to his ears.

"Make a sound to warn him, and I'll have you hanged!" some man was threatening.

That was the voice of Sergeant Garcia. So this was why Garcia had not been at the tavern.

"It was told me," he heard Garcia continue, "that Zorro had instructed you to be here and get back your tax money. One of my spies got the message, eh? After we capture the rogue, I'll deal severely with you. No longer can you claim you do not know Zorro."

"But we never have seen his face, Senor Sergeant!" one of the men replied.

ZORRO heard the crack of a whip and a man's howl.

"Do not lie to me!" Garcia cried. "If Zorro is not caught at the tavern, he will be caught here. We'll see the face behind his mask. And he will swing at the end of a rope! Some of you, his friends, will swing also. And the others will spend a long time in prison, or be sold in peonage into Mexico."

Garcia gave a command for silence, and there was no further talk.

Zorro moved his horse on down the slope and to the hard ground at the bottom. A streak of lightning stained the sky, and by its fleeting light, Zorro saw five horses standing together, the saddles empty. Garcia had dismounted his troopers, then, and no doubt had them stationed around the hut. And the peons were being held prisoners inside.

"Garcia!" Zorro yelled suddenly. "I ride into no trap tonight! Your own voice warned me!"

He heard exclamations of rage. Zorro fired his pistol and sent a ball in the general direction of the hut. And he touched with his spurs and sent the black thundering past.

The troopers fired wildly even as Garcia

was howling for some of them to mount and pursue. As Zorro reached the highway, he pulled up behind a jumble of rocks and reloaded his pistol swiftly.

He counted them as they passed—all the men Garcia had with him except one. Zorro turned back, doubly cautious now. Since the sergeant's presence had been discovered, he was no longer silent, but raged.

"We'll take these rogues to the barracks!" he yelled at the trooper remaining with him. "Get the rope from your saddle, and we'll lash them together. I'll start a fire in the hut."

Zorro watched until a tiny flame had sprung up. The fire grew swiftly and its light revealed five peons huddled together. The trooper was uncoiling his rope. Garcia stood near the prisoners, a pistol in his hand.

"Garcia!" Zorro shouted from the darkness. "Your silly troopers are chasing shadows through the rain. I have you covered with my pistol. Drop the one you hold. You and your man get on your horses and ride to the highway. At once!"

Not for an instant did he expect Garcia to obey without protest. Garcia was a tough soldier who had been long in service.

Garcia could not be sure where Zorro was waiting, for the rushing wind and the rain distorted sounds. Garcia suddenly kicked at the fire, scattering it, almost obliterating it. He yelled at his trooper, and the man ran to mount. Zorro sent a shot toward them, then urged his horse away from where he had been standing.

The horse's hoofs made little sound as Zorro rode past the hut and behind it. But Garcia and his trooper made noise enough.

"After the rogue!" Garcia was shouting. "Follow me!"

They went, as Zorro had hoped, toward the spot where he had been. And Zorro moved his horse toward the hut.

"Pedro Ortez!" he called softly. "Zorro is here. I saw you by the light of the fire. Come to me, quickly."

A man shuffled toward him through the mud.

"Over this way," Zorro guided. "Listen to me well. I have here a bag of money I took from the tax gatherer. I put it in your charge. Return to your friends the amounts the tax collector took from them. Be honest in this dealing. Then, you and the others divide the rest among you and hurry down the highway to San Diego de Alcalá and remain there. If you do not, Garcia may put you into prison. Do you understand?"

"*Si, senor!* May the saints bless you, Senor Zorro!"

Zorro tossed the bag at the man's feet, then wheeled his black horse and rode.

Less than an hour later, he had delivered the horse, his Zorro costume and his weapons to his faithful Bernardo, who was waiting to take them away to safe hiding. And, not Zorro now but Don Diego Vega, he was comfortable in his father's house, telling him of the night's adventures.

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 8)

were: First—Chuck Sheppard; second—split between Stub Bartlemay and Ike Thommason; fourth—Tom Henderson.

Ike Thommason won the bareback bronc riding, Sonny Tureman was second, Charley Chick was third and Earl Hoppes was fourth. Chuck Sheppard copped the calf roping, Red Allen was second, Joe Mendes was third and Oren Fore was fourth.

Bud Spence was best man in the steer wrestling, Bill Kunkle was second, John Hagen was third and Arnie Will was fourth. Larry Daniels was tops in bull riding, Paul Topping was second, Vidal Garcia was third and Andy Gibson was fourth.

Arkansas Livestock Show

In the final results of the Arkansas Livestock Show and Rodeo staged at Little Rock, Texas Kidd, Jr., and Roy Martin tied for first prize in saddle bronc riding and so split first and second. Dick Nassau was third, and Pete Danley fourth.

Clyde Hebert cooped the bareback bronc riding, Bill Barton was second, Red Smith was third and Grant Marshall fourth. N. A. Pittcock was best man in the calf roping, Tony Salinas was second, Jiggs Burke was third and Royce Sewalt fourth. Ken Boen was tops in steer wrestling, Royce Sewalt was second, Carlos Green was third and Junior Fuller was fourth. Bill Barton outrode the field to first prize in the bull riding, Brant Marshall was second, James Stepp was third, and Orvall Mann was fourth.

Canadian Cowboy Champs

The Cowboys Protective Association of Canada has announced its 1947 cowboy champions through its secretary Jim Maxwell, who stated that many attendance records were broken during the season and that interest in rodeos and individual performers is definitely on the gain in Canada.

Ken Brower, of Manyberries, Alta., was the winner of the title of All Around Champion Cowboy. Points were awarded at seventy-one rodeos that ran their course through the Provinces of Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. In order to qualify for the All Around a cowboy must place at least three times in a riding event,

[*Turn page*]

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roping and steer wrestling, or steer decorating. Many Americans rode the Canadian Circuit but only one, Floyd Peters of Browning, Montana, garnered enough points to win an event championship.

The winners were: All Around Championship, Ken Brower, Manyberries, Alta.; Saddle bronc riding championship, Joe Keeler, Calgary, Alta.; Calf Roping, Floyd Peters, Browning, Mont.; Steer wrestling and decorating, Harold Manderville, Skiff, Alta.; Bareback bronc riding, Harold Manderville, Skiff, Alta; Bull and steer riding, Ralph Thomson, Black Diamond, Alta.; Wild Cow Milking, Tom Duce, Cardston, Alta.; Wild horse race, Cliff Vandergrift, Turner Valley, Alta.

The Calf Scramble

At the time this is being written the Houston, Texas, Fat Stock Show and Rodeo is making great preparations for its coming show which is expected to break all previous records. One of the features of the stock show is a calf scramble in which contestants who are members of the 4H Club and of Future Farmers of America participate, and is one of the grandest things ever conceived for youthful stockmen. Usually ten calves are turned loose in the arena and twenty boys take after those calves. Each boy who first catches and halters a calf and leads the animal from the arena becomes the owner of the calf. Each calf has been paid for by some business firm or individual and they become the sponsors of the boy and the calf.

The boy must take the calf home, feed him for a year under supervision of the county agent, keeping track of the feed and the cost, together with the monthly gain of the animal, must report to his sponsor at least once a month; and must bring the calf back to the show in a year, where it is judged, and sold at auction. The proceeds of the sale go to the boy. Those calves in the scrambles usually weigh around 175 lbs. to 185 lbs. They come back in a year weighing from 950 lbs. to 1,050 lbs, and many of the young men in college are paying their way with the money received from their scramble calves of a few years ago.

Houston Fat Stock Show started this scramble eight years ago with only 13 calves. This year there are 150 calves to go into the scramble, with an additional 100 dairy calves that cost the sponsors $200.00 each and will go into a new and unique milking contest.

Year after year at the Houston Stock Show and Rodeo, while the cowboys are risking their necks and garnering big prize money, thrilling and entertaining the visitors who are pouring money into the tills to help meet the expenses of the big show, the Stock Show is doing much for the cattle industry of the great state, and for the youth of the state who are interested in stock. In 1947 the Grand Champion Steer, a Hereford, "Flat Top," owned by Jim Bob Steen, a boy of Goldthwaite, was sold to Edgar Brown of Orange for $15,000.

Three hundred and fifty thousand attended the Fat Stock Show and Rodeo last year. While the show has purchased a large tract of ground and expects to spend around three million on the land and improvements, it will be a couple of years or more before the buildings will be completed, and the show can be moved from the municipally-owned Sam Houston Coliseum and grounds to its new location.

Rodeo Dates and Data

Here are some rodeo dates that have been set. San Angelo, Texas, Fat Stock Show and Rodeo, March 11th to 15th; Tulsa, Oklahoma, Livestock Show, Exposition and Rodeo, March 12th to 21st; El Centro, California, Imperial Valley Roundup, March 19th to 21st; Olathe, Kansas, Rodeo, May 28th to 30th; Eureka, California, Redwood Empire Rodeo, June 25th to 27th; Topeka, Kansas, Rodeo, July 3rd to 5th; Calgary Exhibition and Stampede, Calgary, Alta., Canada, July 5th to 10th; Frontier Days, Cheyenne, Wyoming, July 27th to 31st.

Carrol Dowell, wife of Buck Dowell, well-known cowboy who won the steer wrestling at the Roy Rogers Rodeo in Chicago, has been ordered by her physician to take a complete rest for at least six weeks. Buck and Carrol are wintering at Kissimmee, Florida.

Earl Lindsey, business manager of the Rodeo Cowboys Association, was said to have sent out a broadcast to all RCA cowboys not to go to the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show Rodeo, and was reported to have stated that the show's officials had announced their intention of putting on an amateur rodeo, which under the rules of the RCA would prohibit any RCA cowboy from taking part.

This decision of going amateur would not only keep the regular rodeo cowboys out of the competitive events, but would also keep the top fancy ropers, trick riders, girl bronc riders, clowns and such specialty acts from taking place as they are all members of RCA

It is reported that the Junior Chamber of Commerce, of Charlotte, North Carolina, have signed a contract with Milt Hinkle to produce a rodeo for them about April 7th to 12th, and it is said that Hinkle will be arena director of a fifteen-car wild west show that will take to the road the latter part of April. The show is said to be financed by German Davis and Associates of Concord, N.C.

Col. Jim Eskew, owner of the JE Ranch Rodeo of Waverly, N.Y., is negotiating with a number of indoor arenas for rodeo engagements through April and May. Summer dates already lined up by the JE include the regular annual show on the home ranch during the week of July 4th, and the Grotto Rodeo, the third week in July at Rochester, N.Y., and the Firemen's Rodeo at Gerry, N.Y., the last week in July.

Well, waddies, that is about all there is to

[*Turn page*]

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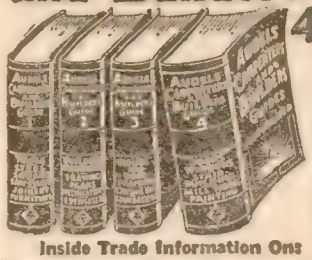

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dish up at the old Chuck Wagon this time, so we will get the rangeland cafeteria rolling on with the herd and will be looking forward to meeting you again next month. Until then, *adios.* —FOGHORN CLANCY

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

A SHIP was no place for a cowhand, thought Rafe Caradec, ex-puncher, gambler, soldier of fortune, wanderer of far places. Especially a cowhand who had been shanghaied aboard ship by means of a few knockout drops in his drink.

A big man was Rafe Caradec, a man to take the measure even of a murderous brute like Captain Borger, who ruled with iron fist and boot and revolver. He would have gone over the side long before were it not for Charles Rodney.

Rodney was dying. Borger had beaten him up once too often and the last time had smashed him up inside. Without a doctor there was no help for him and Rafe Caradec could only stand by helplessly and watch his friend die.

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Rodney's pulse was feeble. He could barely move a hand to touch Caradec's.

"You've got the papers?" he asked. "You won't forget?"

"I won't forget."

"See Carol—my wife. Tell her I paid Barkow his money, but I don't trust him. Take care of her—of them, Rafe. You're my last chance. I've got to trust you!"

And a few minutes later, Rodney was dead. Rafe had met him in a San Francisco dive where they had innocently shared the doped drinks that had landed both of them on this ship.

Charles Rodney was a sun-browned cattleman who had come to Frisco to raise money for his ranch in Wyoming. There was a mortgage on that ranch owned by a man named Barkow, a mortgage Rodney couldn't meet because rustlers had cut his herds so badly. He went to Frisco, and managed to get a loan from a friend. Surprisingly enough, he met Barkow in town and promptly paid off the mortgage. A few hours later, wandering into Hongkong Bohl's place, recommended by some of Barkow's friends, he was doped, robbed, and shanghaied. And now, after a year of Bully Borger's beatings, he was dead, his whole promising life thrown away.

In Rafe Caradec's pocket was a deed made out to Rodney's daughter and Rafe jointly, for the Rodney ranch. The dying man had placed his last hope in the big adventurer from nowhere.

Rafe Caradec went up on deck. Three men were there, waiting, with a boat. They were all westerners, cowboys, miners, wanderers like Caradec himself.

"Get the boat ready," Caradec said. "I'm going to call on the Old Man."

His sandal-shod feet made no sound as he stepped into Bully Borger's cabin.

[*Turn page*]

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"What's wrong?" demanded the giant captain. "Trouble on deck?"

"No, Captain," Rafe said softly. "Trouble here. I've come to beat you within an inch of your life. Charles Rodney is dead. You ruined his life, Captain, and then you killed him."

Borger was on his feet like a cat, lunging for the brass knuckles in his drawer. Rafe Caradec's left hand caught the captain's wrist in a grip of steel and his right sank into the huge man's middle. It stopped the big man for a second and Rafe's hard skull took him full in the face. Bones crunched under the impact.

In agony Borger tore his hand loose and swung with the brass knuckles, a blow that would have felled an elephant. Rafe went under the swing, smashed left and right to the wind, and as Borger doubled up, Rafe helped him with a palm on the back of his head. At the same time Rafe brought his knee up hard, ruining what was left of Borger's face.

A ripping, tearing succession of punches that slashed like meat cleavers cut Bully Borger into a bloody, senseless hulk and left him unconscious across his settee.

With that little chore done, Caradec trotted upstairs again. The boat was silently lowered overside and they slid down the rope, one after another. They were on their way to Wyoming, to take up the fight Charles Rodney had lost.

That's how THE TRAIL TO CRAZY MAN, by Jim Mayo, begins. WEST readers will remember A MAN CALLED TRENT, by the same author in the December issue, a smashing gun-fighting novel. The same swift, thrilling action, fast pace, color, and the hair-raising fights that made the earlier story memorable are outstanding in THE TRAIL TO CRAZY MAN. Author Mayo has a style that carries the wallop of a mule's hoof and this is Mayo at his best.

Also featured is the second installment of Larry Harris' smashing serial of the Lone

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Stuart's only desire is to find General Houston and give him a personal report, never dreaming of the shame and humiliation that lie ahead. [*Turn page*]

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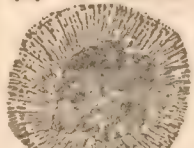

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LETTER BOX

THE bouquets and brickbats flew thick and fast in this month's batch of mail and if we duck involuntarily every once in a while, please overlook it. Here's a certain Texas lady with a very good throwing arm.

I am disappointed that you mess up a fine western magazine with such trash as that senseless, inane, foolish, silly Zorro foolishness. It would ruin any magazine. WEST is just splendid except for that Zorro idiocy. I can't stomach it. Blank pages would be better. Then I could write verses on them.—*Mrs. Nancy Bryant, San Antonio, Texas.*

You must write us a verse sometime, Mrs. Bryant, now that you've aroused our curiosity. Can you really write poetry? We'd sure admire to see a helping of it. But getting back to Zorro, we sure hate to annoy you with the subject, but there's so danged many folks think he is wonderful that sometimes it makes us a little dizzy. For instance:

I can't think of anything nasty to say about WEST, so I'll just say I enjoy reading all the stories and I think Zorro is tops. How about another long Zorro novel?—*Alex Byrne, Los Angeles, Calif.*

See, Nancy? That's only one. We get mill—uh, thousands of them like that!

My favorite stories were WHISTLE OVER THE PLAINS by Ed. Churchill, TRAIL OF THE TWISTED HORSESHOE by Donald Bayne Hobart, HIT THE SADDLE by Allan Vaughan Elston, MONTANA MAN by Paul Lehman, BURY ME NOT by Allan R. Bosworth and HANGMAN'S HARVEST by Walker A. Tompkins.

But boy, oh, boy, what a story did I read when I read A MAN CALLED TRENT, by Jim Mayo. That was a story!—*Armand Robert, Romeville, La.*

We agree without reservations as you will have already noted in the previous section of this article. And if you want something as good as A MAN CALLED TRENT, just you watch out for A TRAIL TO CRAZY MAN by Jim Mayo, in the next issue.

I have been reading WEST ever since its first issue and most of the time the stories were crackerjacks, but the January number's HUNGRY RIVER GUNS was way below par, just the same old run-of-the-mill stuff, far removed from the exciting, knock 'em down and drag 'em out yarns for which WEST is noted. How about a real HE-MAN story in the next issue?—*Louis Soucie, Lowell, Mass.*

One of the things an editor learns, Louis, is that there is no argument in matters of taste. The story you think is terrible is the one three other people rave about. And sometimes the story the editor himself doesn't like any too well is the one that brings down the house.

I have been reading WEST for quite some time now. I liked THE RIDER OF LOST CREEK, BADMAN'S RETURN, THE TRAIL OF THE TWISTED HORSESHOE and BURY ME NOT. I also like the Rawhide stories and Zorro. How about some horse stories, or other animal stories? You can count me one of your real fans, because I also read RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, TEXAS RANGERS, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, EXCITING WESTERN, THRILLING WESTERN, RIO KID WESTERN.—*Merle Betzner, Concordia, Kansas.*

Welcome brother. We will see what we can do about getting you some horse stories. Lots of folks like animal stories, but they represent something of a technical problem in that animals don't speak to one another and stories without dialogue are apt to go a little dry. For that reason few authors do them and they are not too plentiful. But we'll do something about it.

And now, *amigos*, we will have to bid you the fondest of farewells and hope to see you right here next issue. And meanwhile, please send us a letter or postcard sounding off as these other correspondents have done. Kindly address it to The Editor, WEST Magazine, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Thank you! —THE EDITOR.

IMPORTANT NOTICE

The next issue of WEST will be dated

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and will be on sale at all stands early in May

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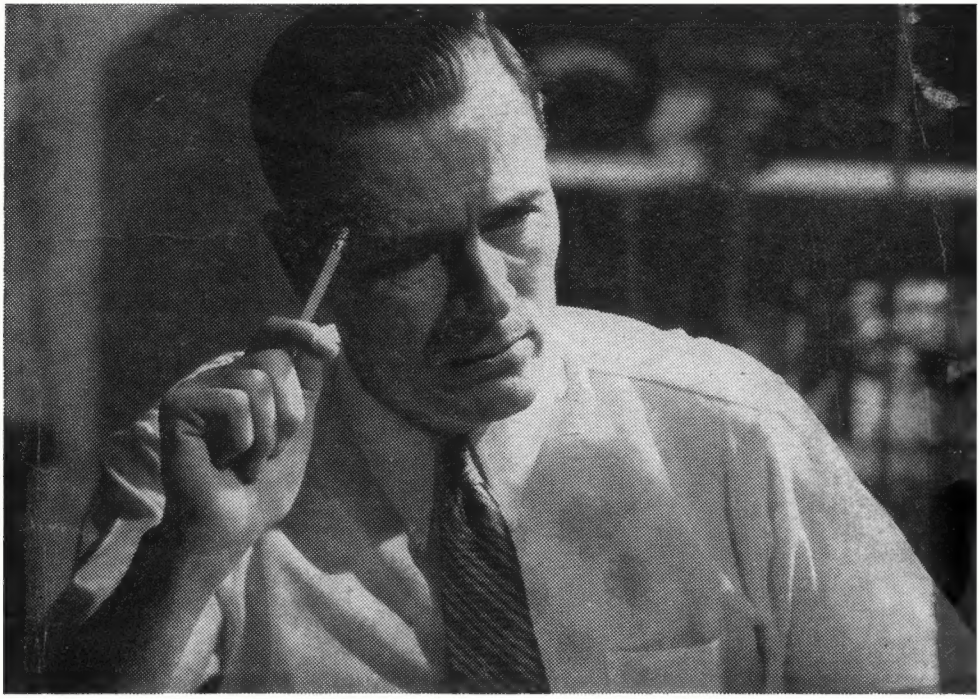

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